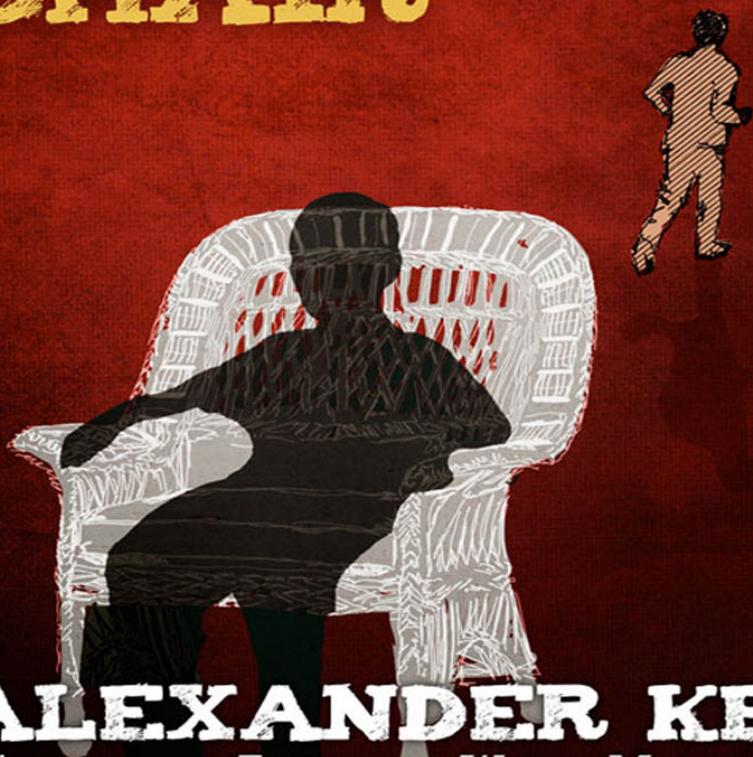


MYSTERY OF THE SASSAFRAS CHAIR



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Mystery of the Sassafras Chair

Alexander Key



To the memory of a very special tree I knew, with curious leaves and scented roots

1

Inquiry

TIMOR, hurrying across the narrow mountain street to the courthouse, felt as if he was being drawn by an invisible string. This was not an unusual feeling for Timor—his mind worked in odd ways, so that one part of it often made him do things before the other part was quite aware of the reasons. He had never been in the courthouse before, and he hated to enter it now. The ugly old building repelled him like a yawning trap. But the invisible string tugged at him, pulled him up the worn steps, drew him past a knot of farmers in the hall, and left him dangling in a dingy room on the right.

Now that he was here, speech and confidence suddenly deserted him. It was hard enough to face strangers, even when he knew what to say. And at the moment he didn't. Of the three people in the room, not one gave him the assurance he needed.

The two men at the nearer desk merely scowled at him, and went on talking as if he did not exist. The third person, a tall angular woman with a beaked nose, studied him with cold eyes as he approached, then turned as her telephone rang and snatched up the receiver. She was dressed like a man in old corduroy trousers and jacket.

"Sheriff's office," she announced in a harsh voice.

"Yes, this is Maggie McBane. What's your trouble? Umm ... Stop shouting, Henry—I hear you. Yes, I'll send somebody out."

She slammed down the receiver. "Brad," she ordered, "take a run over to Henry Shope's place and check on his timber. Somebody's been stealing it."

The younger of the two men, a stocky fellow with a large jaw and a protruding chin, grunted something as he reached for his hat and strode from the room.

Timor, feeling like a frightened minnow out of water, was aware of the woman's stony blue eyes studying him again. "You want something?" she snapped.

"I—I just wanted to talk to the sheriff," he began hesitantly.

"My husband's sick. I'm running the office for him. Anything wrong?"

"Not, exactly, ma'am." Timor swallowed, searching for words. "It—it was something that happened here in the mountains last month, up on Blue Gap Road past the Forks. You see, we have a summer place up there. But we've just got in town, and all we know is what we read in the county paper. We—we have it sent to us down on the coast."

"Well?"

Timor suddenly wished he had sought information from anyone but this formidable woman. "It—it's about Wiley Pendergrass," he managed to say. "He lived near us, and took care of the cabin."

"Oh, him," Mrs. McBane snorted. "What do you want to know about him?"

Timor fought down his resentment. "Everything you can tell me, ma'am. You see, we were friends. He was one of the best friends I ever had."

"He must have sold you a real bill of goods, sonny."

More than ever, Timor regretted his smallness. People treated him as if he were younger than he actually was. He shook his head. "Old Wiley wasn't as bad as he seemed, ma'am."

"He robbed Nat Battle and put him in the hospital!" she retorted. "Wouldn't you say that was pretty bad?"

"Is there any real proof?" he asked stubbornly. "I mean, did anyone ever find that little box they say he took?"

She frowned irritably. Suddenly she said, "If you read the paper, you ought to know the facts. Why don't you face them? Nat caught the old skinflint in the back of his shop that night. Wiley broke his head, and ran out to his truck. There were plenty of witnesses around, including two deputies who were at the diner next door. They chased Wiley up the valley, and saw him throw the box from his truck just before he crashed. What more proof do you need?"

"The box, ma'am. With everything still in it."

Her eyes sharpened upon him, then she shrugged. "We roped off the area and put men to searching. Even had the forest rangers out. But everyone knew what Nathaniel Battle had in that box. Next day the valley road up there was jammed. You can guess what happened. Now, does that satisfy you?"

Timor wet his lips. "No, ma'am. How can you be sure what it was that Wiley threw away?"

"Two good men saw him," she flung back, her voice rising. "You trying to tell me two experienced deputies can't recognize a bright tin box at fifty feet when they're holding a spotlight right on it? I think, sonny, that you'd better run along and forget about Wiley."

Timor wished he hadn't come here. "I—I'm sorry I bothered you," he muttered, and started to turn away.

"Just a minute," she ordered. "What's your name?"

"It's Timor, ma'am, though I'm usually called Tim. I—I'm Timor Hamilton."

"Oh. You're that foreign kid Colonel Hamilton adopted?"

"I'm not adopted, ma'am. The colonel is my uncle."

"You don't say! I thought he'd found you and your sister in the Philippines or some place."

"No, ma'am—and Odessa isn't my sister. She's my cousin, though we were raised together."

"You were? Where?"

At her frank curiosity Timor smiled. Some of his resentment faded. She was still formidable, but at least she was honest and human.

"We were raised in Malaya, ma'am. My parents worked in the Orient for the State Department. When—when they were killed by the Communists, Odessa's father retired from the army, and we came over here to live with him."

She grunted. "So that's how it was. What do you think of America?"

Timor swallowed. Secretly he still found America strange and frightening, and he hated it. It was so big and rushing and cold, and no one had time for anyone else. No one except persons like Wiley, whom others looked down upon. But he

couldn't come out and say such things. One had to be diplomatic.

"Everything is so—so different here," he replied cautiously. "It's hard to get used to it all."

"H'mm." She scowled at him. "Maybe that explains it."

"Ma'am?"

"The way you look and act."

"My mother was Indonesian—if that's what you mean."

"So. That's partly it. I've heard your cousin, Odessa, is an artist. Are you one too?"

"I'm trying to learn."

"You're sure an odd one. And," she suddenly thrust at him, "you're the first person to come in here and ask questions about Wiley. Why?"

"I explained why, ma'am. He was my friend."

"I want a better answer than that," she snapped. "I'm no fool—and you don't look like one, though you may be. You're pretty young."

Timor clenched his small hands in his jeans and glanced uneasily around. The remaining man at the other desk was watching him, and slowly chewing a match. The man had pale eyes in a flat, expressionless face. Something about the pale eyes brought a prickling at the back of his neck.

"When you know a person well," he told her, "you know there are certain things he won't do. It's like knowing water won't run uphill."

She snorted. "If you're so sold on Wiley, you'd better go talk to Nathaniel Battle."

"Yes, ma'am. I intend to."

Again he started to leave, but she said, "Wait. Didn't you tell me you'd just got in town?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You haven't been to your cabin yet?"

"No, ma'am. We had to shop first. Odessa's at the market now." He looked at her curiously, but she dismissed him with a frown and turned to her phone as it rang again.

Timor went out and crossed the street slowly, wondering what was in her mind. Something wasn't right.

Around the corner he caught the flash of Odessa's green dress. She was heading for their station wagon with a sack in each arm. He hastened to catch up with her, and took one of the sacks.

"Timmy!" she exclaimed, seeing the look on his face. "What in the world have you been doing?"

"Asking some questions."

"And you got the wrong answers. You look *tida senang*."

"I can't help it. I feel *tida senang*—about everything."

She wrinkled her nose at him, concerned. She also was a small person, very slender and dark. Though her mother had been French, she was so much like Timor in many ways that she might have been his sister. No one would have guessed she was half again his age.

Without realizing it, they began talking rapidly in the simple Malay they had learned before English—discussing old Wiley, arguing about him, and going over what Tim had heard in the courthouse. They were interrupted by Odessa's father,

who appeared suddenly behind them and tossed a shopping bag into the car beside her painting equipment.

"Will you two stop yapping that jargon and use English?" he grumbled. "You're like a pair of natives. Can't you ever remember you're in America?" The sound of Malay, which he had never learned, always irritated the colonel. He was a gaunt, gruff man, a professional soldier who had spent more years on distant firing lines than at quiet posts of duty. Odessa, who hardly remembered her mother, was still almost a stranger to him.

"Yes, Daddy," she said meekly. "Did you get your trout flies and your license?"

He nodded and crawled into the wagon. "Let's go. I'd like to do a little fishing before dark."

They slipped into the front seat beside him. Odessa said, "You may not have much time for fishing. The place will be a mess. Don't forget Wiley isn't there to have everything aired out and ready for us."

The colonel grunted and started the motor. He drove slowly through town. "Weren't you yammering about Wiley when I came up?" he asked. "I thought I heard his name mentioned."

"I was telling Dessa about going to the sheriff's office," Timor admitted. "I—I was sort of hoping they'd learned something new."

"Are you trying to make a fool of yourself?" his uncle grumbled. "Why can't you accept the truth of what happened and forget about Wiley?"

"I can't help how I feel, Uncle Ira."

"Nonsense! You can't go through life just feeling your way along."

"Timmy's like Nani," said Odessa, speaking of Timor's mother. "She believed in her feelings. In all the years she was taking care of me after Mother died, I never knew her to be wrong about something."

The colonel shook his head. "You've lived in the East too long. Good grief, everybody knows what Wiley was like! In and out of jail on liquor charges. And light-fingered ..."

"He never stole anything from us," Timor insisted.

"Hmp! He was always borrowing money he never repaid. Talked me out of a hundred dollars last fall before we left. I'll never see *that* again."

Timor hid his smile. Old Wiley had certainly had a tongue. "Oh, he'd have paid it back in some way, if he'd lived."

"Well, he's gone now," snapped his uncle, "and it's all over. So let's forget it."

It was impossible for Timor to forget Wiley. And it wasn't over. He knew this with a certainty that was beyond explanation. In his mind, old Wiley was still alive, and as full of cackle and chatter as ever. Oh, the flesh and bones were dead, but, as Nani had often told him, the real you isn't your flesh and bones. The real you never dies ...

Beyond the town the station wagon gathered speed, and moved swiftly through a winding valley walled with high blue mountains. They were at the Forks almost before Timor realized it.

As they crossed the bridge where two rushing streams came together, Timor looked quickly at the cluster of buildings on his right. There was the familiar old country store, with a filling station on one side and a diner on the other. Beyond the diner rose a small new structure of carefully fitted logs that hadn't been there last year.

Over the door of the log building he glimpsed a sign that read: GO TO BATTLE FOR GEMS. A battered jeep was parked near the entrance, but no one was in sight.

Timor wondered about Nathaniel Battle, whom he'd never met. "Folks call him Nat," old Wiley had said. "But his real name's Nathaniel, which he likes better. Ain't nobody like him. Knows more about gems than any feller in the Carolina mountains. Part Cherokee, same as me—only he's got more o' the blood, an' a heap more temper to go with it."

The colonel swung into a smaller road, and they began to climb. Crowding hemlocks met overhead. Tangles of rhododendron hid the rocky stream that clattered below them. Timor shivered in the gray mist that was now creeping through the trees.

It was up here somewhere, not far from their cabin, that Wiley's ancient truck had crashed. He was watching for the place when Odessa's fingers pressed his arm.

"Behind us," she whispered. "That car—it's been following us all the way from town."

He looked back, suddenly uneasy. It was hard to see over the pile of luggage and supplies in the back of the wagon. But presently, rounding a turn far behind them, he made out a black car with a spotlight on the driver's side.

The black car kept its distance until they slowed for the narrow private road that wound down to the stream. Then it shot forward, followed them over the little bridge, and parked behind them when they reached the cabin.

The colonel got out, frowning. Timor stared as the driver of the black car strode up to them. It was the man he had seen in the sheriff's office, the one with the pale eyes who had been chewing a match.

The man was chewing a match now, but he spat it out before he spoke. "Colonel Hamilton," he began softly, displaying a badge, "I'm deputy Rance Gatlin from the sheriff's office."

The colonel raised his bushy eyebrows. "Eh? Yes?"

"If you don't mind," came the curiously soft voice, "I'd like to have a look inside your place."

The colonel's eyebrows went a bit higher. "Why, may I ask?"

"Want to check on a few things. Didn't Wiley Pendergrass have a key to your cabin?"

"He did. He was the caretaker."

"Well, there were no keys on him when he died, and there were no keys hidden in his shack."

Timor, listening, remembered how Wiley was about locks and keys. Wiley disliked keys and made trick locks for nearly everything, even his truck. He started to say something, but remained silent as he remembered how Mrs. McBane had questioned him.

The colonel said, "What do you expect to find in our place? Surely not Wiley's keys!"

"I don't know what to expect," Rance Gatlin replied softly. "Late last night Mrs. McBane—she's the sheriff's wife—was driving by here, and she saw a light in your cabin. She supposed you were back, and thought nothing of it until this afternoon—that was when this boy of yours came in to ask some questions. Then she found out you'd just reached town."

Timor caught a sharp glance from his uncle. The colonel drew his keys from his pocket, selected one, and started grimly up the cabin steps.

“Wait a moment,” the deputy purred. “I think you’d better let me go in first.”

2

Gift

TIMOR followed his uncle up to the porch, and peered about him with troubled eyes while the deputy tested the door and inserted the key in the lock.

The sprawling cabin looked very different, with Wiley not here to greet them. They had made several trips up here last year, and each time they had found the grounds tended, the floors swept, the rooms aired, the refrigerator working, and the water from the spring higher on the mountain turned on. And Wiley had never failed to have a fire laid in the fireplace, and a bouquet of wild flowers on the table. Neglect showed everywhere now. In the creeping mist the place even seemed haunted.

The heavy door creaked open, but Rance Gatlin did not enter immediately. Timor saw him place another match between his teeth, and begin chewing it thoughtfully while he studied the dim interior. Finally he took a few steps inside, then beckoned to the colonel.

"See anything different in here?" he asked.

"So far as I can tell," the colonel answered, "nothing's been touched. The only things of value we leave here are a few guns and fishing rods—but they are in that corner cabinet yonder, and it's still locked."

"Someone was in here last night," Rance Gatlin said. He pointed to vague muddy footprints outlined in the dust on the cabin floor. "He came in after the dew had fallen, and he must have used Wiley's key."

Odesa, peering over Timor's shoulder, said curiously, "If nothing's been stolen, why would anyone want to come in here?"

The deputy shrugged. "I can think of one good reason. Please stay outside until I've taken a few shots of these footprints. I'd like to have them on file."

He went back to his car and returned quickly with a small camera and some flashbulbs. When he had snapped several of the clearer prints, the colonel asked, "Wasn't Wiley mixed up in moonshining?"

"He's been caught with illegal liquor," the deputy admitted. "And can you think of a better place than this to hide the stuff?"

The colonel made an angry sound deep in his throat. "That explains it! Some rascal's been storing liquor in here, and he came in last night to get it. He's probably taken it all out, but we'd better search the place."

They searched the cabin carefully, looking in closets and even under the beds. They found nothing that did not belong there. And nothing, it seemed, had been disturbed. Yet Timor could not get over the feeling that there was something about the place that wasn't quite as it had been.

"Confound it," muttered the colonel. "I'd like to know who was in here last night."

"So would I," murmured the deputy, his pale eyes still roving about, curious and secretive. "Do you know anyone Wiley might have lent his key to?"

The colonel shook his head. "The old fellow was pretty sly. He must have had friends, but he never talked about them—unless it was to Tim here. Tim, did Wiley ever mention the name of anyone he might have had any dealings with?"

"No, sir," Timor answered truthfully. He could have enlarged on this statement and given an exact description of at least one person he had glimpsed at Wiley's shack. But something warned him to silence. As Wiley had once said, "Ain't always wise to tell everything you know. It's like usin' up all your ammunition before you track down your b'ar."

Timor, by now, was convinced that he had a very sizable bar to track down, and that he had better proceed cautiously. He had learned little enough at the courthouse, but at least his visit had started something—and he had met Rance Gatlin.

He was relieved when the deputy left. There was a great deal to be done before dark. The colonel said, "If you kids will take care of things here, I'll go up to the spring and turn on the water."

The colonel departed up the misty slope with tools and a flashlight. While Odessa cleaned, Timor connected the refrigerator and turned on the lights. The water heater, which had been drained for the winter, would have to wait until it was safely filled before he plugged it in. He was closing the fuse box when he noticed a fresh smear across the dusty cover. It suddenly occurred to him that whoever had turned on the lights last night must know the cabin well—for the fuse box was hidden in a cramped cabinet where no one would have thought to look for it.

He was puzzling about this as he brought in their luggage from the station wagon. Odessa said, "Do you think Mr. Gatlin was right in believing someone stored liquor here?"

"No."

"Then why would anyone come in last night?"

"I—I don't know yet, but there's a reason. Something's different here."

"I don't see anything different."

"Well, something is."

She shook her head. "Honestly, Timmy, I don't know what to make of you at times. Are you still convinced that Wiley didn't have anything to do with what happened at the Forks?"

"I'm absolutely sure he didn't."

She sighed. "It doesn't make sense, but I know you too well to say you're wrong. If you feel a thing, then that's that. Timmy, wasn't there something in the paper about Rance Gatlin?"

"Yes. He's one of the deputies who chased Wiley that night. He drove the car."

"Oh. Wouldn't he be able to give you some information if you had a talk with him?"

He shook his head. "That man wouldn't tell me anything."

"Why not?"

"He's the kind that never says what he's thinking."

"How about the other deputy—what's his name?"

"The sheriff's wife called him Brad. I believe the paper said his last name was

James. I saw him in the courthouse. He wouldn't be of any help—not to me, anyway. When you're a stranger, and sort of a foreigner ..."

"I know. Some people up here are friendly, but others just stare at you. It was that way when I was shopping."

She shivered in the growing chill. He said, "I'd better get a fire going."

It was nearly dark when he went outside for wood. He brought in several loads, and soon had a fire blazing cheerfully in the big stone fireplace. It transformed the cabin.

"Water's on," Odessa announced. "I'll fix something to eat. It'll have to be out of cans—I'm too tired to cook anything tonight."

Timor set the table, then stood frowning at the chairs flanking the fireplace. "Dessa," he asked suddenly, "how many ladderback chairs do we have here?"

"Only two. Don't you remember? I bought them in Asheville when Daddy first brought us to the cabin. One went to your room, and I put the other by the fireplace."

"Well, we've got three now."

"But that's impossible!" She came in from the kitchen and looked quickly at the two chairs. "Those are the two I bought. One of us must have brought your chair in here last fall. How do you make three out of it?"

"Because there's a chair in my room. I thought it was the one that had been in there all the time—until I noticed these."

He hurried down the hall, suddenly excited, and switched on the lights in his room. The room was too small to contain anything but a bed, a chest, a table, and a single chair. And there was the chair—a polished ladderback, placed by the table where a chair had always been.

Timor stared. Earlier he hadn't looked at it, or he would have noticed how different it was, even in the dim light. He had merely accepted it because it was there. This new chair was lower, broader, and made of a much paler wood than the others. The wood had a deep golden gleam. In fact, it almost seemed to glow.

"*Tabé!*" Odessa exclaimed behind him. "What in the world—"

"Why—why, that's the chair Wiley was making for me!" Timor burst out.

"He was making you a chair?"

"Yes. Last fall. Out of sassafras. See how yellow it is, and how it glows?"

"It's beautiful! But why sassafras? I mean, I've never heard ..."

"Well, it's sort of a special wood. You see, people up here won't cut it for firewood, even when it's dead—they think it's bad luck. Wiley had found a small tree that had been knocked over when the road was being fixed, and he hated to see it go to waste. You know how he was. Always making something out of pieces of wood he'd saved."

"I know," Odessa said. "He was a wonderful craftsman. He could make anything. But why a chair for you—and out of sassafras?"

"It—it was just an idea he had. We were talking about woods one day, and how some kinds have properties that others don't have. Sort of magic properties, I mean. Apple is one, if it's old enough, and holly is another. Then there's hawthorn, and some kinds of willow. Witch hazel is very special, and so is sassafras. Wiley said a chair made of sassafras ought to be really—"

Timor stopped. He had been so interested in the chair that he had failed to hear his uncle come back into the house. Now he turned as Colonel Hamilton

appeared in the doorway and said wearily, "If supper's ready, how about eating? What's keeping you two?"

Odessa pointed to the chair. Before she could explain about it, Timor saw something he had not noticed before. It was a small loop of rawhide on the back of the chair. He lifted it off and held it up. To the loop was fastened a brass key.

"Look!" he exclaimed. "It's Wiley's key to the front door!"

Odessa took it, frowning. "It is! Daddy, this explains how someone got in the cabin last night. He used this key, and left it with the chair Wiley made."

"Eh? What's this about a chair?"

Timor explained. The colonel stared at the chair and shook his head. "I'll be doubly hanged," he muttered. "Who on earth could have done that?"

They discussed the mystery while they ate supper.

"It had to be one of Wiley's friends," said the colonel. "Tim, didn't you ever meet anybody up at Wiley's place?"

"No, sir. Not exactly."

"What do you mean by not exactly?" his uncle demanded. "Either you met someone or you didn't."

"I—I never actually met anyone, Uncle Ira. I do know he had visitors at times, though he never told me who they were, or talked about them. I saw one leaving once, but Wiley said he was one of those seng hunters that lived over the gap."

"Eh? What's a *seng* hunter?"

"Ginseng hunter. They call it seng up here in the mountains. You know, it's that little plant whose roots are worth so much. Dessa and I have seen it for sale in the drug shops back home. The Chinese pay awful prices for it."

"Oh," said the colonel, "I didn't know people still bothered to look for the stuff. Isn't it pretty scarce?"

"It sure is. Sort of like gold, but twice as hard to find."

And those who hunted it, Timor knew, were secretive people who never told where they'd found it, or how much. Old Wiley, he suddenly remembered, always had bunches of ginseng roots hanging in his shack to dry. Quite a lot of it, in fact. At thirty dollars a pound, Wiley should have had plenty of extra money without being forced to borrow from the colonel or do any of the other things people said he did. As for trying to steal Nathaniel Battle's gems ...

When bedtime came Timor went eagerly to his room and closed the door. Slowly he approached the new chair Wiley had made and stood looking at it wonderingly. It seemed to glow almost as if it were alive. If it had spoken to him at that moment, he would not have been surprised. Finally he sat down in it, and rubbed his hands over the polished wood.

For the first time he realized it had a pleasant, aromatic smell—the same smell that had always been in Wiley's shack. The aroma of fresh sassafras roots and shavings. As he thought of the shack and all he'd seen there, questions crowded his mind.

Was it the ginseng hunter who had brought the chair into the cabin last night, and left the key? And why had Wiley borrowed a hundred dollars from the colonel when he could have sold his ginseng for far more than that amount? What had happened to the roots? Were they still in the shack?

Suddenly he wanted very much to see the shack again. There were secrets there, and perhaps he could uncover something that would help explain the

puzzle that everyone thought was solved. Not that there seemed to be any connection between Nathaniel Battle's tin box and old Wiley's ginseng—but the ginseng itself was a puzzle.

Last summer, when he'd first come to the mountains, everything had been so new and unknown that he'd given little thought to the value of Wiley's ginseng. The shack was always full of drying herbs and roots, and in the beginning he'd supposed most of the roots were sassafras. Now he knew they were not. He'd smelled only the sassafras. But ginseng has no aroma, and there had been pounds and pounds of it. Strange ...

Timor's head began to nod. With an effort he managed to get undressed, and crawled wearily into bed. His last thought before sleep poured over him was the wish that he could talk to old Wiley again, if only for a few minutes.

3

Visitor

SOME SMALL SOUND in the night brought Timor awake. He lay motionless, listening, not at once remembering where he was. For a moment everything seemed strange—the odd mustiness of the bedding that hadn’t been aired, the blackness of the room, the steady rushing outside that was like heavy rain. Through his mind flashed a vision of his home in Malaya, with the myna birds chattering in the great banyan tree shading the yard. But this was not the tropics—there were heavy blankets over him. He was in America, and back in the mountains. The rushing he heard came from the wild stream below the cabin.

What had awakened him? Surely it wasn’t the stream. There’d been something else, something on the edge of consciousness he couldn’t quite recall.

Vaguely uneasy, he raised up on an elbow and tried to identify the sounds around him. From somewhere in the tangle up the slope came the cry of a whippoorwill. Nearer, in the surrounding hemlocks, he made out the soft bubbling of an owl. Mice scampered through the cabin walls, and crickets chirped beyond the window. Though the bedroom doors were closed, he was aware of the faint snoring of his uncle across the hall. Odessa, in the next room, slept quietly.

Reassured, he settled back on the pillow and closed his eyes. He was drifting away on the edge of sleep when someone seemed to call faintly from a point near the window.

“Hey, Timmy! Can you hear me, boy?”

The voice, though very faint, was familiar. He had heard it many times before in this very place, a friendly conspiratorial voice that always awakened him in the early hours when a fishing trip was planned. The best fishing came at daybreak—and only old Wiley Pendergrass knew the secret pools where the biggest trout lay hidden.

To Timor, half asleep, the voice was like a magnet. Without thinking, he rolled out of bed and pressed his face against the window screen. “Mr. Pendergrass,” he whispered, “are you there?”

There was no answer. Nor could he see anyone in the vague moonlight that dappled the rocks between the trees and the creek.

Then Timor remembered. It couldn’t possibly have been old Wiley. He would never see Wiley Pendergrass again. Unless, of course, people sometimes came back for some reason, as Nani had said they did.

Troubled, and more than a little upset, he crawled into bed again. Maybe he’d only dreamed it. But no, it wasn’t a dream. He was sure he’d actually heard old Wiley’s voice. Could it be a trick of the imagination? There had to be some explanation for it.

Timor sat up and turned on the light above the bed. His questioning eyes moved from the window to the new chair beside the table, and he thought of the day last summer when he'd seen Wiley at work on a piece of yellow wood in his shop.

Wiley had said, "Know what kind of tree this come from, young feller?"

"It—it smells sort of like camphorwood," he'd answered, sniffing the aromatic shavings on the work bench, "but that's an Asian tree. I don't suppose it grows around here."

He could feel again the stab of old Wiley's sharp blue eyes, which glittered like sapphires. Wiley was a little man with a small foxy face, deeply lined, and a heavy thatch of dark hair that, in spite of his age—he was way past seventy—was only beginning to gray.

"Tain't camphorwood," Wiley had told him. "I've heard tell of it, but it don't grow here. They say it's right special—but it couldn't be half as special as this. This is *really* special—more so than witch hazel. It's sassafras."

"Sassafras? The same tree whose roots you use to make tea?"

"The same."

"Those roots sure make a wonderful tea—but what's so special about the wood?"

"Ha! D'you think the tea'd be worth drinkin' if there wasn't a heap of magic in the tree itself?"

"I—I hadn't thought of it that way. Still, there are trees back home, like the ilang-ilang and the banyan, that have all kinds of properties. So I guess you're right."

"Course I'm right!" Wiley had said emphatically. "Near everything that grows has a little magic in it, though some has a heap more than others. Take wild plum in bloom—it puts a spell on folks at night. An' witch hazel—everybody knows you can find water in the ground with it, an' even gems. That is, if you got the power. The same goes for willow, though it ain't near as strong. As for hawthorn, it's full of good luck—so long as you don't cut it. But sassafras, well, it's the most special of all. It's got life in it—a sort of spirit, mebbe."

"It has?"

"By Dooley, you'll find out! I'm going to make a chair out of this sassafras wood—and it's goin' to be your chair. You'll learn how special it is when you start usin' it. But there's just one thing you gotta remember."

"What's that?"

"All the magic in the world don't do nothin' for the feller that don't believe in it. It's really believin' in a thing that does the trick."

"Oh, I believe in it," he'd told Wiley. "In Malaya everybody knows the truth of that."

Now, in the small hours of the night, Timor looked curiously at the finished chair, wondering what special properties it might have. There was something almost magical in the way it seemed to glow. Maybe, if he sat in it again and concentrated, it would help to solve some of the questions that were puzzling him. The colonel, of course, would say it was nonsense. Still ...

In the next instant he forgot the chair as his ears again caught the faint sound of his name.

"Timmy!" came the familiar voice, pleading. "Can you hear me now?"

"I—I hear you!" Timor exclaimed. "But just barely. Where—where are you?"

"I'm right here, ding blatt it, shoutin' my head off! Can't you *see* me, Timmy?" The voice did seem a trifle nearer, though it was very faint.

"I—I can't see you at all, sir, and I still can't hear you well."

"By Dooley, there must be some way! I gotta make myself plain to you. I just gotta!" There was a pause, then the faint voice said, "Timmy, watch the chair. If I sit down in it, mebbe the sassafras will help."

Fascinated, Timor stared at the chair. The curious glow brightened, and a vague form began to take shape in it. Suddenly the shape became real, and there was Wiley Pendergrass sitting hunched before him, gnarled hands clutched nervously together, sharp blue eyes intent upon him and glittering with hope. The old man was wearing faded overalls and a patched jacket; he was wheezing a little as if he were out of breath, and his wizened face was puckered with worry.

It was several seconds before Timor could get over his astonishment and find his tongue. Then he burst out happily, "Mr. Pendergrass, you—you've come back!"

Old Wiley's fingers tightened and he leaned forward. "You see me now?" he gasped between wheezes. "You hear me good?"

"I sure do! How—"

"Thank Pete an' bless Joe," the old man muttered, and sat back with a sigh of relief. "I near lost my cackle trying to get here. I been shoutin' an' shoutin', movin' from one sassafras tree to another tryin' to make you hear me. If only I'd thought of the chair earlier—lemme get my breath ..."

Timor was bursting with questions. He started to speak, but Wiley held up his hand.

"I better do the talkin', son. I dunno how long I can keep myself visible tonight. It takes some doin', an' I ain't rightly got the hang of it yet. Anyhow, I ain't got much time—only till the end of the week, just three more days."

"Three more days?" Timor repeated wonderingly.

"Yep. I got special permission to come back—promised I'd give up my glory crown if they'd give me five days. Now two days is gone already, so we gotta work fast. Timmy, I need your help bad!"

"Of course I'll help you!" Timor said quickly. "I know you're innocent—and I'm going to prove it."

"You ain't gonna do nothin' of the kind!" Wiley exclaimed. "Think I'd go to so much bother for a fool thing like that? I didn't come back here to slap whitewash on a no-good reputation! Anyhow, I ain't got time."

"B-but don't you want your name cleared?" Timor persisted, gaping at him. "Everybody's blaming you for what happened to Mr. Battle."

Old Wiley pounded his fist on the chair arm. "I don't give a fiddle-faddle what they think of me! It ain't important. The important thing is to find Nathaniel's tin box an' get it back to him fast. You got no idea the trouble that box—"

Wiley suddenly stopped and put a finger to his lips. Timor heard footsteps in the hall, then a soft tapping on his door.

Odessa whispered, "Timmy? Is—is anything wrong?"

"I—I'm all right," he managed to say.

She opened the door and peered in at him, her large dark eyes wide with

concern and curiosity. "I was sure I heard you talking to someone," she said in a low voice. "Your light was on, and I was afraid maybe ... Timmy, what are you doing sitting up in bed at this hour? It's after two in the morning. Did you have a nightmare?"

Timor glanced worriedly at Wiley, then back at Odessa. He was expecting her to give an incredulous gasp at the sight of the chair's occupant, for now she was looking directly at Wiley. But she seemed entirely unaware that a third person was in the room. And there was Wiley as plain as day! Couldn't she *see* him?

For a moment Timor hardly knew how to reply to her. Then he managed to stammer, "I—I guess I've been dreaming. Th-theres so much I don't understand. Everything is so—so strange. About the chair, I mean."

"Well, it is rather odd," she admitted, not understanding all that he meant. "But it's nothing to have nightmares about. Put out your light and try to get some sleep."

He turned his light off and waited until Odessa had gone back to her room and closed the door. Then he whispered cautiously in the dark, "Mr. Pendergrass, are you still there?"

"Sure I'm here, ding blatt it—but my juice is gettin' low. Leave the light off. Mebbe I can talk to you longer."

"But—but why couldn't Odessa see you?"

"Because she's like most other folks—she ain't got the power. And you have. You're the only person that can see an' hear me—which means you're the only one that can help me. But mind, Timmy; don't let on to nobody about this, or they'll just say you're cuckoo an' batty in the head."

"Odessa will understand," he whispered. "And I'll need her help."

"Don't tell her too soon. Kinda work up to it first. Now, the main thing you gotta do is talk to Nathaniel, quick as you can. The only way to find out what happened is to get everybody's side of it—"

"Don't you *know* what happened?" Timor burst out. "You were there!"

"Sh-h-h-h!" Wiley cautioned. "Keep your voice down, or you'll wake your uncle. Sure I was there, Timmy, but I don't know what happened either."

"You must have seen *something*! Where were you before the deputies started chasing you?"

"Well, it's this way, Timmy," came Wiley's voice from the chair. "I had some business with a feller down at the Forks, so I drove there about dark an' parked my truck in them pines behind Nathaniel's place an' the diner. I didn't see a soul when I got out the truck. Near everybody was in Fritz Grosser's store, an' their cars were all out front. I slipped in the back of the store, found the feller I was lookin' for, an' had a quick private talk with him. Didn't take but a minute—but that was the very minute Nathaniel was being robbed. You see—"

"Mr. Pendergrass," Timor interrupted, "who was the man you were talking with?"

"Can't tell you, sonny. Wouldn't be right. What I mean is, there's a heap of complications in this, an' they don't have nothin' to do with the robbery."

"But he could clear you!" Timor protested. "You can't be in two places at the same time, and if you were talking to him when—"

"Sh-h-h-h!" said Wiley. "You trying to wake folks up? Ding blatt it, I done told you I ain't got time to get cleared. We gotta find that little box, an' find it quick!"

“Well, if you only stayed a minute in the store, you must have started back to your truck at the same time Mr. Battle’s robber ran out the back of his gem shop. Didn’t you notice anything?”

“Timmy, I didn’t see nobody till I got halfway back to the truck. Then I heard a feller yell out, ‘Stop him! Stop him!’ I didn’t recognize the voice, it was so hoarse, but when I looked about quick I seen one of them deputies comin’ round the side of the diner. So I started runnin’ faster.”

“But—but why did you run, Mr. Pendergrass? You weren’t guilty of anything, were you?”

“Timmy, I had to get away from there fast. I *had* to. Like I said, there’s complications ...”

Old Wiley’s voice was getting weaker. Timor said, “Can you talk a little louder? I can hardly hear you.”

“My juice is runnin’ low ... gotta sign off till tomorrow night. Timmy, go see Nathaniel ... first thing. Remember ... we only got till the end of the week ...” Wiley’s voice died.

“Mr. Pendergrass!” Timor whispered urgently. “Where are you?”

There was no answer. He turned on the light and looked at the chair.

The sassafras chair was empty. Old Wiley had faded away completely, leaving a dozen important questions unanswered.

Nathaniel

A SUDDEN DISCORD of static, voices, and twanging mountain music from the kitchen radio brought Timor out of a sound sleep. He rolled over and raised up on one elbow, rubbing his eyes while he sniffed the drifting aroma of breakfast bacon. Sunlight, slanting through the window, touched the carved back of the sassafras chair, making the yellow wood gleam like gold. The chair seemed almost alive. In fact, it was actually glowing a little.

Timor sat up and stared at it. Had he really talked to Wiley Pendergrass last night—or was it only a dream? If it had happened back in Malaya, he realized, he wouldn't have questioned it. But this wasn't Malaya.

"Timmy!" Odessa called. "Aren't you ever going to get up? Breakfast is ready."

"Coming," he called back.

He spun out of bed, swiftly drew on his clothes, and hurried to the bathroom to splash water on his face and comb his thick unruly hair. It couldn't have been a dream, he told himself. I really *saw* him and *talked* to him—and he was sitting right there in the chair when Odessa entered the room ...

In the kitchen Odessa greeted him with a cheerful "*Tabé*," and added, "are you going sketching with me this morning, Timmy? If you are, you'd better get a move on—or have you other plans?"

Sketching? It was one of the things he'd looked forward to all winter, an entire summer drawing the tangled tree and rock shapes that so fascinated him here. Odessa had majored in art at college, and she'd had her first important exhibition during the winter. Odessa painted, and she was wonderful; but his own interest was decoration and design. Everything in life had to be designed, and to learn design you must start with nature ...

"Sketching?" he repeated absently. "I—where's Uncle Ira?"

"Daddy got up early and went fishing." Odessa looked at him curiously. Suddenly she said, "Timmy, is anything wrong? Is it the—the dream you had last night?"

"I wasn't dreaming," he replied. "And I've got to see Mr. Battle. It—it's terribly important."

"What's the big rush? Can't it wait?"

He shook his head. "We have only three days."

"Three days for what?"

"To find that box."

"You mean the *peti blik*—Mr. Battle's tin box? Who says you must find it so soon?"

"That's what Wiley—I mean, I—"

He stopped, confused, conscious of a sudden quietness in Odessa, a sharpening

of the dark eyes that were now intent upon him.

"Timmy," she said slowly, "haven't we always been close—like brother and sister? You don't have to keep anything from me. Last night I know you thought you were talking to Wiley Pendergrass, because I heard you. Sit down and eat your breakfast and tell me about it. And don't worry about Daddy—I packed a lunch for him, and he won't be back till late this afternoon."

"All right."

He sat down and told her about Wiley and the chair. "You don't have to believe me," he finished, "but that's just how it was."

Almost in slow motion Odessa took her seat across the table from him. As he saw the look in her eyes, Timor's spirits fell.

"Timmy," she said finally, "I know you're like Nani; it's something you can't help. When we were in the East, I never doubted her when she told of happenings like that. But I was much younger then, and things were different out there. Timmy, we're in America now."

He clenched his hands. "What difference does that make?"

"Please don't act hurt. Being in America makes a lot of difference. Things are more, well, real here. It's mainly a matter of beliefs." She paused, and added quickly, "Oh, I don't doubt that you *thought* you saw Wiley in the chair. But if the chair has anything special about it, why didn't *I* see Wiley? If, as you say, he was sitting right there in front of me when I came in ..."

He clenched his hands again, trying desperately to think of some way to explain. "Maybe," he said, "it's a little like being able to find water with a forked stick. What's the word for it?"

"Dowsing," she told him.

"Well, you know some people can do it, and some can't. Remember last summer when Wiley cut a forked witch hazel stick and showed us how to dowse? He said we could even find gems that way if we had the power. And I—I found some."

"I remember. It didn't work for me, although it seemed to for you. You did find a few sapphires in the creek that way. But as Daddy said, it was probably just an accident. After all, the creek *is* full of little sapphires, and you can always find a few if you search hard enough."

He looked at her miserably. "Dessa, don't you want to help me?"

"Of course I want to help!" she assured him, smiling suddenly. "I'm on your side, although I may not look at things the way you do. If you feel so strongly about Wiley, you certainly ought to do something about it. You really want to talk to Mr. Battle?"

"Yes. Just as soon as possible."

"All right. Finish your breakfast, and I'll drive you to the Forks."

They spoke little on the ride down the valley. At the Forks, Odessa parked the station wagon near Grosser's store, and they sat a minute looking curiously at the cluster of buildings in front of them. Timor felt his first misgivings. It had been a month since the robbery. What if the thief had been some stranger passing through? How could anyone possibly hope to locate him now? But no, reason told him; it couldn't possibly have been done by a stranger ...

"It had to be a local person," he said, thinking aloud. "Someone who knew what was in the box, and where to find it."

"I hope you're right," Odessa told him, "but be careful what you say to Mr. Battle. About Wiley and the chair, I mean. You don't want him to think you're a little queer."

"I'll watch it. Aren't you coming in with me?"

"You'll do better without me. Anyway, I need a new broom for the cabin. While I'm shopping, maybe I can get better acquainted with Mrs. Grosser and learn a few things."

Timor, visualizing the burly and tight-lipped Mrs. Grosser, could not help smiling. Ask any of the Grossers a question, old Fritz, young Sammy, or his mother, and all you ever got was a shrug or a grunt, especially if you were one of the summer people.

"Well, at least I'll try," said Odessa.

They got out. Timor watched her enter the store. Then he drew a deep breath and headed nervously for the new log structure beyond the diner.

No one was in the front of the little shop when he entered, but he could hear a discouraged pounding coming from the back room. At least to Timor's ears it sounded discouraged. The place, he saw, was still unfinished inside. His glance took in the clutter of boxes filled with mineral specimens and souvenirs, the bare shelves, and the empty showcase. Was Nathaniel Battle packing up to leave? It looked that way.

He cleared his throat. "Mr. Battle?" he called.

The pounding stopped. A very lean, very brown, and very intense looking young man in rumpled khakis appeared in the opening at the left of the showcase. Black eyes in a face like an angry hawk's looked down at him.

"Yes?"

In spite of the eyes and the sharpness of the voice, Timor's uncertainty vanished. He felt a kinship with Nathaniel Battle. And because his mind worked in odd ways, he suddenly found himself saying, "Wiley told me a lot about you. You're half Cherokee, aren't you?"

It wasn't at all what he had intended to say, and he knew it was impolite. But the words were out before he could stop them.

"I am," replied Nathaniel, almost angrily. "What about it?"

"Then we're almost alike," said Timor, smiling. "My mother was Indonesian. I'm Timor Hamilton."

"I'll be jiggered!" Nathaniel came from behind the showcase and extended a lean brown hand. "Pardon me for snapping at you. I'm half Irish, you see, and this morning the Irish has got me down." He paused. "So your name's Timor. H'mm. That's the Malay word for east."

"How did you know?" Timor exclaimed.

"Ought to. I was stationed out there with an army detachment. They spoke a different language everywhere I went, but I found if I learned a little everyday Malay I could get along all the way from Singapore to New Guinea." Nathaniel paused again, and raised one eyebrow. He said quietly, "Something tells me you came here to talk about Wiley."

"Yes, sir. Do—do you really believe he robbed you?"

Nathaniel looked at him sharply. Slowly he shook his head. "My eyes told me he did. Other eyes insisted he did. But this part of me,"—he placed a finger over his heart—"this part of me says he didn't. Wiley was my friend. He lent me

money to help me get started here—sold all his ginseng, and even borrowed some extra; I suspect it was from your uncle. Anyway, how could a friend like that turn around and rob me?”

“He couldn’t. Not Wiley.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that, Timor—or do they call you Tim?”

“Nearly everyone calls me Tim.”

“O.K., Tim. Anyway, I’ve been doing some thinking since it happened, keeping my eyes open and my mouth shut. If I didn’t have to be out of here next week ...”

“Next week!”

“Yes—unless I can raise a lot of money in a hurry, Or find what was stolen. Nearly everything I owned—and a lot I didn’t own—was inside that tin box. I suppose you know what it held.”

“The paper said it contained one of the most valuable sapphires ever found in the mountains, as well as a lot of other gems.”

“That’s right. The other stones were mine, but the sapphire wasn’t. The owners—they’re the Connors who have that new mine south of here—the Connors turned it over to me to cut, and then sell for them.”

“You—you cut stones, Mr. Battle?”

“Of course. You can’t tell anything about a sapphire until it’s cut; this one had a star. Tim, we seem to be two of a kind, so why don’t you call me Nathaniel?”

Timor smiled. “Thank you. I will.”

“As I was saying, I had a buyer for that sapphire, a gem specialist I’ve sold a lot of things to. He was driving in that night to look at it.” Nathaniel paused, and his lean jaws knotted. “If I don’t pay for that stone, other people are in trouble too. The Connors, mainly. They still owe for their property, and now they could lose it.”

“Then—then we’ve got to find your tin box,” Timor said. “And I think we can.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because—” Timor hesitated. “Because of something that’s happened. I, well, for one thing I know that Wiley was in the back of Grosser’s store at the time you were being robbed.”

“How did you ever learn that?”

“Well, Wiley—” Timor stopped and bit his lip. Something made him ask, “Do you believe in magic, Mr. Battle—Nathaniel?”

Nathaniel Battle raised one eyebrow. “I can take it or leave it, although I’ve seen some odd things in these mountains. What kind of magic are you talking about?”

“Magic in woods. Sassafras especially.”

“That’s different. There are people around here who wouldn’t cut a sassafras tree for anything. I’m one. Wiley was another. Come to think of it, Wiley had a piece of sassafras he’d found somewhere; he told me last winter he was making a chair out of it for a friend of his. Was it for you?”

Timor nodded. For a moment they were silent. Then Nathaniel said softly, “That must be a mighty special chair, Tim.”

“It is. I—I found it in our cabin last night after we arrived. It was put in my room the night before by somebody who had Wiley’s key to the place. We know that because Mrs. McBane was driving by that evening and saw a light on, but

she didn't think anything of it at the time because she thought we were there."

"You've talked to the old battle-ax?"

"Yes. First thing when we reached town yesterday." He told of his inquiry at the sheriff's office, and of discovering the chair after Rance Gatlin had left the cabin.

"Go on," Nathaniel urged. "I know there's more."

"You won't think I'm just—just telling you a tale?"

"I won't know what to think till I hear it." Nathaniel looked at him earnestly. "Tim, if you weren't Wiley's friend, I wouldn't be talking to you this way. Sure, I'm educated and I held a commission in the army; around here I'm supposed to be level-headed and straight-thinking. But when it comes to some things I'll admit to you I'm pure Indian. So, what about this chair Wiley made?"

"O.K." Timor drew a deep breath and plunged into the story of Wiley's visit.

Nathaniel did not interrupt. He leaned over the showcase, resting on his elbows, his long fingers locked together and slowly tightening. "So," he murmured finally, "that's how it was."

Timor nodded silently.

"And he told you to come and see me right away?"

"Yes. He said the only way to find out what happened is to get everybody's side of it."

Nathaniel unclenched his hands, then clenched them again. He seemed deeply moved. "Bless old Wiley! Why did I doubt him? He's trying his best to help—and right now I sure need it. He—he told you he'd be back tonight?"

"Yes."

"Then maybe we'd better—" Nathaniel stopped abruptly, his eyes on the doorway. Timor glanced quickly around.

In their absorption over Wiley and the chair they had been paying little attention to the occasional car that turned in at the Forks, nor had they been aware of approaching footsteps. But now there was the crunch of gravel outside, and someone moved past the window and swung up to the doorway. Timor recognized the stocky deputy with the protruding chin he had seen briefly in the sheriff's office.

Brad James said casually, "Mornin', Nat." He came inside and leaned against the doorframe. His hard marble-blue eyes fastened on Timor. He seemed amused. "So you're the young feller that found the chair, eh?"

Timor swallowed, suddenly uneasy and resentful. Had the deputy been listening outside before he entered?

Nathaniel snapped, "What's on your mind, Brad?"

The deputy grinned. "Just wanted some information. I met Rance Gatlin over at Grosser's a few minutes ago. Miss Hamilton, this kid's cousin, was there. She was tellin' about the chair that was found last night after Rance was out there. You hear about it?"

"Tim just told me."

"Well, the Hamilton girl said it had old Wiley's key on it. Mighty peculiar. Rance was wonderin' if either of you could have any idea who put the chair in the cabin?"

Nathaniel shook his head. "Tim doesn't know any more about it than I. What difference does it make?"

"Makes a heap of difference." The deputy scratched his protruding chin with a thick forefinger. "Never seen anybody more slippery than that Wiley. He was runnin' likker for somebody, but we never could make him talk, and we never caught him with nobody. But it stands to reason that the feller that had his key to the Hamilton place is the one we're after."

"Is that good reasoning?" Nathaniel said wryly. "What sort of person would bother to bring the chair and leave the key?"

"Then why didn't he bring the chair openly if he had nothin' to hide? Look, Nat, Rance has it doped out that the feller who brought the chair may've been helpin' Wiley the night you was robbed. Get what I mean?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Nat, you seen Wiley run that night, didn't you?"

"I saw a man run after I was hit. But I was too dizzy to recognize who it was."

"Well, I seen 'im. Drivin' off like mad in his truck. An' I seen your tin box when he throwed it out later after we chased him. Rance an' me are both thinkin' that Wiley knowed just where to throw that box—that there was a feller waitin' there to get it. See it now? Help us find the feller Wiley was dealin' with, an' we'll find that box of stones."

Timor opened his mouth to speak, but closed it as he felt the warning pressure of Nathaniel's hand on his shoulder.

"Brad," Nathaniel said, "I'd like to check over this whole thing with you if you have time. Where's Rance Gatlin?"

"He had to go on over the Gap an' serve a summons on some feller. I just met him at Grosser's to give him the paper." The deputy cocked his head, and a corner of his mouth twitched. "What's got into you, Nat? This boy been tellin' you things?"

There was a sudden silence. Nathaniel's mouth hardened. "Tim's trying to help. He's got me thinking. Brad, I never had a chance to talk to you about this. I passed out after you reached me that night, and it was all over before I left the hospital. But something's wrong."

The marble-blue eyes narrowed. "Yeah?"

"I'll show you how it was," said Nathaniel. "Let's go into the back room."

The small crowded room behind the partition contained a workshop on one side, and living quarters on the other. Timor's quick glance took in the barred window flanking a door in the rear, then followed Nathaniel's pointing finger to the bottom drawer of a filing cabinet. It was here that the tin box had been hidden.

"I didn't have my safe here at the time," Nathaniel was saying. "So I stuck the box in there behind some papers, just before I went to the diner. I'd worked here most of the day getting the doors hung and the locks fixed, and I had about an hour before my gem buyer was due to meet me. It was a clear night, and before I hid the box I took a look out the back door to make sure no one was around, then locked the door and turned off the light."

Brad James grunted. "I remember how clear the night was. Funny you didn't spot Wiley when you looked out, because he musta watched you through the window right afterward."

"Someone certainly watched me," Nathaniel said quietly. "But there wasn't a soul in sight when I looked out."

"There were those gravel trucks parked out there. Wiley could have slipped behind one of 'em."

"How about the drivers of the gravel trucks?" Timor asked. "Where were they?"

Nathaniel shrugged. "Home, I suppose, Tim. The road department was working up your way at the time; they always left the loaded trucks here at night so there wouldn't be any delay in the morning. Anyway, here's what I'm getting at: the box was too big for my coat pocket, and I didn't want to be seen carrying it. That's why I left it here. But when I went out, I found that I couldn't lock the front door. At the moment I thought the lock was jammed. I was in a hurry to eat and get back and I didn't realize till a minute or two later, after I'd gone into the diner, that I must have got the keys mixed up. You see, the keys for both doors were supposed to be duplicates, but only one key would work both doors. So I hurried back to the shop to try the other key—and that was when I heard a noise in here by the filing cabinet."

"So you come tearin' inside," said Brad James, "an' Wiley clobbers you."

"Somebody did, but it happened too fast to make out who it was. I saw only that my box was gone, then something hit me and I blacked out for a few seconds. When I managed to get up, the back door was open and I could see a man running outside."

"Wiley," said the deputy.

"Yes," Nathaniel admitted. "Though I didn't recognize him at the time. I wobbled after him, yelling for help, and you and Rance Gatlin came. I managed to tell you I'd been robbed, then I blacked out again and woke up in the hospital."

The stocky deputy stood scowling a moment. "I know all that. Rance an' me was just goin' in the diner when we heard you yell. What's the catch?"

"I'm coming to it. First, before you heard me yell, I want to know whom you saw, either in front of my place or the diner."

"Didn't see nobody over this way. Everybody was at Grosser's."

"You sure?"

"Course I'm sure! It was a bright night, an' all the lights out front was on. Rance an' me had stopped by Grosser's to have a look 'round. Thought Wiley or somebody might be tryin' to sneak in some likker. While I went into the store, Rance checked the cars outside. We met in front of the diner about a minute after you left, 'cause I seen you leave it when I come out the store."

"Who was in the diner when you got there?"

"Just Mrs. O'Grady an' her girl—an' Sammy Grosser."

"You didn't see Sammy enter?"

"Wasn't paying no mind to Sammy. But he'd just gone in. I remember he was closin' the door when I got there an' met Rance."

"Then where was Sammy before he went into the diner?"

"How should I know? You accusin' him of anything?"

"Certainly not. I'm trying to clear up something. Brad, I want you to describe what you saw Wiley throw out of his truck when you and Rance were chasing him."

The deputy was becoming irritated. "Why, it was just a plain tin box. Saw it for only a second before it fell in the brush below the road, but it sure shone

bright with the light on it. What're you getting at?"

"That it wasn't my box you saw. I didn't realize it before, but I'm almost certain now that Wiley wasn't carrying anything when I saw him running. And the box was too big to fit in his pocket."

Brad James was plainly angry now. "If you was too dizzy to recognize Wiley right off, you sure wouldn't 'a' seen what he was carryin'. Anyway, what was he runnin' from? To hear you tell it, only three people was near enough to have snagged your box—me, Rance Gatlin, or Sammy Grosser." He glared at Nathaniel, then demanded, "Which one of us are you accusin'?"

Nathaniel shook his head. "None of you. I'm simply trying to find a few answers."

"Phooey! You want answers, mebbe this crazy foreign kid can get 'em from that talkin' chair he found. That oughta give you some *real* answers!"

Brad James spat and stalked from the shop.

5

Second Visit

FOR LONG SECONDS after the stocky deputy had gone, Timor stood with his small hands clenched, his mouth tight with fury. Suddenly he burst out, "He heard us talking about the chair! He came up and stopped by the window, and heard every word!"

Nathaniel made a growling sound, then touched him reassuringly on the shoulder. "Don't let it worry you. We found out a lot, Tim, and he didn't like it either. You know, Brad's related to the Grossers. Sammy's his nephew."

"No wonder he was mad!" Timor drew a deep breath. "Do you think they had anything to do with robbing you?"

"I doubt if Brad did—and it certainly wasn't Wiley. Let me show you something."

Nathaniel rummaged through a packing crate. He found a small carton, opened it, and drew out an enameled tin box, half the size of a shoe box. It was painted black and green, and had been carefully rubbed to a dull finish.

"No one knows I have this, Tim. It's a duplicate of the box that was stolen. Do you think it would shine brightly with the light on it?"

"It—it couldn't."

"Well, I'm sure Brad was telling the truth about what he saw. That would clear him. You see, if he'd known what the box looked like, and wanted to blame it on Wiley, he wouldn't have described it the way he did. He honestly believes Wiley was guilty."

"Then that leaves Mr. Gatlin—and Sammy Grosser."

"Yes."

Timor had a momentary vision of Mrs. Grosser's burly son. Of the three Grossers, Sammy was the biggest, and more secretive than even his mother.

Nathaniel frowned. "Rance Gatlin comes from a tough family. They'll all skin you if they can. They thought they had the Connors skinned on that mine deal, until ... Sammy Grosser is another matter. Sammy was in the shop that afternoon; he wanted to look at the Connors' gem, so I showed it to him. Tim, did you ever see a bronze sapphire?"

"A *bronze* one? I thought all sapphires were blue!"

"A bronze sapphire, Tim, is one of the rarest gems on earth. They're found only in this area. Most of our sapphires, you know, look like worthless pebbles until they're cut. This one was not only large, but when I cut it, as I told you, it had a star. Bronze with a star! When Sammy got his big hands on that star sapphire, he was so hypnotized he could hardly put it back in the box."

"So he knew what the box looked like. Did it have a lock?"

"Oh, yes. I had the box on top of the filing cabinet at the time. It was about the

only piece of furniture in here. Now here's the strange thing:

"After I hid the box in the bottom drawer, and went to the diner and came back, hardly two minutes had passed. Sammy wasn't in the diner when I was there. If he'd just gone in when Brad saw him, he must have come from this direction, possibly from the back of the shop here. But, if he'd stolen the box, what did he do with it? There wasn't time to break it open or hide it—and he certainly wouldn't have carried it into the diner."

"He *must* have hidden it somewhere," Timor argued. "Unless—unless it wasn't Sammy."

"Then let's put Rance Gatlin in his place. You see? There's the same problem. What was done with the box?"

Timor shook his head. "Let's go outside and—and sort of look around."

They went out the back door. Timor peered curiously at the neat graveled area surrounding both the shop and the diner. The diner, he realized, was a full sixty feet away.

"If you'd just finished building," he said, "there must have been some scrap piles and things around. Maybe—"

"No," said Nathaniel. "I'd cleaned the place up and had it graveled. It looked exactly as you see it now."

"What about the trash can?" suggested Timor. "Your robber might have dropped it in there, and picked it up later."

"No. The trash can was inside, full of wood scraps for the stove. It was chilly, and I was keeping the stove going."

Suddenly Timor remembered something. "What about the gravel trucks that were parked out here?"

Nathaniel looked thoughtful. "I'd forgotten about those. H'mm. That may be the answer, Tim. The trucks were parked close together, over near the diner. Anyone coming from the back of the shop would have passed right by them. And of course everyone knew they wouldn't be moved till morning."

"Then that's it! The box was thrown into one of the trucks."

Nathaniel nodded slowly. "It would have been safe there for hours. Only—who did it? And where is the box now?"

Timor wet his lips. "Maybe," he said quietly, "maybe Wiley can help us there. Tonight I—I'll ask him."

The black eyes met his. "I want to see that chair. I was thinking of driving up today to look at it, but now I—I'd rather wait till tomorrow morning. Thanks for coming here, Tim. I don't know where this is going to lead, but you've restored my faith in a lot of things."

Odessa was waiting impatiently when he returned to the station wagon.

"Well!" she began. "You should have been in the store! Did that deputy with the big chin—what's his name?"

"Brad James. Yes, he came over to the shop and told us what Mr. Gatlin thought."

Odessa's eyes were bright. "It was really funny—before those deputies came, I mean. I couldn't get a thing out of the Grossers at first. Such people! They'd make a clam seem like a chatterbox. Mrs. Grosser waited on me, and old Fritz and that big ape of a Sammy sat in a corner and watched. Then I mentioned the

chair Wiley had made for you, and how strange it was to find it in the cabin. It was as if I'd dropped a bomb. Timmy, I wouldn't have believed it, but they're terribly superstitious. Mrs. Grosser actually asked me if I wasn't afraid to have a chair like that in the house!"

Timor laughed. "If she could have seen Wiley—"

"Please, Timmy. You don't have to—"

"You still don't believe me," he accused.

"Maybe I do. I—I don't know. You didn't tell Mr. Battle, did you?"

"Yes, I did," he admitted.

"Timmy! I told you *not* to. What will he ever—"

"But he wanted to know, so I told him—and he didn't even question me. He was awfully low when I went in, but he felt a lot better when I told him, and he said, 'Bless old Wiley!'"

"I'm surprised. Just the same, I wish you hadn't let it out. I can't help it, but I feel *tida senang* about it, as if something awful could happen."

Timor, remembering how Brad James had listened, felt equally unhappy.

"You were telling me about Mrs. Grosser and the chair," he said. "What happened next?"

"Well, I looked around, and there was Deputy Gatlin, taking it all in. I didn't even hear him come in the store. That man! He gives me the creeps, the way he stands looking at you and chewing on a match. Anyway, I had to go over the story again for both deputies. Now, what do you think of Rance Gatlin's idea that another person was involved, one of Wiley's friends?"

Timor wrinkled his nose and pinched it between his fingers. "That's what I think of it. Nathaniel proved that Wiley didn't do it. We've figured out how it was done and we know it had to be either Sammy Grosser or—or Mr. Gatlin himself."

"Timmy! You're not serious!"

"That's how it looks."

Odessa's mouth tightened as he told her about it. She was silent for a moment. Suddenly she said, "I don't like this. Frankly, Timmy, I think we ought to tell Daddy about it."

"Not yet. You know how he is. Besides, we—we don't really know anything for sure."

"But, Timmy, you've started something. From now on, you've got to be awfully careful. It isn't Sammy Grosser I'm afraid of. He's just an overgrown lout—the sly kind. But Rance Gatlin.... Don't you see? If that match-chewing deputy did it, it makes things far worse. He not only injured Mr. Battle seriously, but he pursued an innocent man afterward, which makes him responsible for his death. One could almost call it murder."

A little chill crept over Timor. He hadn't considered that side of it.

"So," she added, "I believe it would be only wise to keep Daddy informed." She turned on the motor. "What do you want to do next?"

"I don't know. I—I've got to think things over."

"Well, let's get back and have an early lunch. I'd like to get started on my painting."

After lunch he helped Odessa carry her equipment down to the creek, and set up her folding easel in an area of tumbled rocks below the bridge. This was their

favorite spot and ordinarily he would have been eager to spend the afternoon sketching with her. He did, in fact, attempt a drawing, but his pencil refused to work. Questions played tag through his mind.

Presently Odessa, glancing at him, asked, "What's worrying you now, Timmy?" "I don't know. I—I keep thinking about the chair."

An invisible string was suddenly tugging at him again. He got up and hurried back to the cabin, and ran to his room.

The sun was on the other side of the cabin, leaving his room in shadow. Even so, the sassafras chair seemed to glow faintly in its corner as if it had a life of its own. Timor stared at it, then whispered hopefully, "Mr. Pendergrass? Are you there?"

There was no reply, though the chair did seem to glow a bit brighter.

"Mr. Pendergrass?" he called. Then, louder, "Mr. Pendergrass! Can you hear me?"

Very faintly now, so faintly that he could barely make it out, he became aware of the familiar voice.

"Sure I hear you, Timmy! Ding blatt it, I followed you here! Can't you see me?"

"I—I can't see you at all, sir, and it's hard to hear you. But the chair's glowing."

"It's the best I can do in daylight. I'm plum' wore out from runnin' around, an' my juice is low. Timmy, listen to me: I'm afraid I done made a mistake."

"W-what's wrong, Mr. Pendergrass?"

"Everything. When I asked you to help, I didn't aim to git you in no trouble. But it seems like I can't do nothin' right. Timmy, I was waitin' there at Nathaniel's place when you come in, an' I been hitchin' rides with people ever since. I just now made it back from town."

Surprised, Timor exclaimed, "You—you have to hitch rides to get around?"

"Course I do! I sure ain't growed no wings yet; it hampers a feller something terrible. Timmy, you've seen Nathaniel an' got things stirred up. Now I think you'd better lay low."

"But why? Did you find out who has the tin box?"

"Timmy, ain't *nobody* got that box. I'd 'a' told you that last night if I hadn't run out o' juice. I been follerin' people around for days, lookin' everywhere. Sammy ain't got that box, an' Rance Gatlin ain't got it. An' nobody else has got it. It's mighty queer. But after hearing Nathaniel tell his side of it, I'm gettin' some ideas. Only thing is, I need a heap more information."

"Just tell me what you want, and I'll get it for you."

"Timmy, go see Nathaniel, an' let *him* do the gettin'. Understand? From now on you gotta keep out of it 'cept for passin' the word between us. There's more danger in this than I figgered an' you done asked too many questions already."

Old Wiley's voice was becoming fainter. Timor said, "Can you talk a little louder, sir?"

"Ding blatt it, I'm shoutin' my head off now! Timmy, ask Nathaniel to find out where Brad James an' Rance Gatlin went after my accident that night, an' how long they was away. An' the same for Sammy Grosser. You got that?"

"Yes, sir."

"An' have him find out what time Shorty Malone an' his pardner came to work

the next mornin'."

"Who is Shorty Malone?"

"Nathaniel knows him. Get back to his shop right away ... got a couple errands myself ... dunno if I can get back ... Timmy ... gotta warn you ..."

Old Wiley's voice was fading. "What did you say, sir? Warn me about what?"

"Tomorrow ... paper ..."

"W-what paper do you mean? I can't hear you! Mr. Pendergrass! ..."

It was no use. Old Wiley had faded out completely.

Timor looked despairingly at the chair. It still seemed to glow a little, though maybe that was the nature of it. What had Wiley tried to tell him? Something about paper ...

He stood frowning a moment, then turned and hurried from the cabin and began running toward the bridge. Maybe Odessa would take him back to the Forks.

The clatter of the creek drowned the sound of voices, and he did not know Odessa was no longer alone until he crawled down over the boulders and saw his uncle standing beside her. The colonel, still in fishing boots, was scowling at a broken rod tip.

Odessa looked upset. "Timmy," she said quickly, "I—I've been telling Daddy about our trip to the Forks this morning. I'm afraid he doesn't quite agree—"

"I most certainly do not," the colonel snapped irritably. "You're both getting yourselves worked up over nothing."

Timor swallowed. "But Mr. Battle thinks—"

"I don't care what he thinks! The fellow has my sympathy, of course, but he isn't facing facts any more than you are. Tim, I cautioned you yesterday about making a fool of yourself." The colonel paused, and his face hardened. "Now I order you to drop the whole thing and forget about Wiley. Is that clear?"

"But—but, Uncle Ira, you don't understand—"

"I understand well enough. The matter is closed, and confound it, I don't want to hear any more about it!"

Timor's chin trembled. He fought back tears that had not come since his first terrible wave of homesickness when he and Odessa had arrived in America to live with the colonel. He had always been at odds with his uncle; this seemed the breaking point.

Suddenly he burst out rebelliously, "I won't drop it! Wiley was my friend! He—he was the only friend I had in this country and I'm not going to turn against him!"

Before the astonished colonel could reply, Timor whirled away and went scrambling over the rocks, then ran for the bridge.

It was not until he was across the bridge and well down the valley road that he began to calm a little. He stopped, out of breath, and stood leaning against a tree while he tried unhappily to decide what to do next.

He couldn't go back and ask Odessa to take him to the Forks. It would only cause more trouble and make things difficult for her. As for his uncle.... The colonel was his guardian and he was supposed to obey him. But how could he with things as they were?

Timor glanced down the shadowy road. It was nearly four miles to the Forks, and already the sun was below the western ridge. Could he make it by dark? He

doubted it, and he had no desire to be caught out in the blackness of a mountain night without a flashlight. But he must see Nathaniel.

Resolutely he began to walk.

6

Searcher

THE VALLEY narrowed a few hundred yards downstream, and the road began twisting tortuously through a wild area of national forest. Great trees crowded the slopes, shutting out the paling light from overhead. The plunging creek could be glimpsed only occasionally below the tangles of laurel and rhododendron.

Timor shivered in the growing chill and wished that he had worn a jacket. He had forgotten how quickly darkness comes in the mountains, and how the temperature can drop. It would be black night long before he reached the Forks.

Once, at a small sound behind him, he paused and glanced over his shoulder. Two deer, dim in the evening mist, had come down the slope and were crossing the road. They were so close he could have tossed a pebble at them. In the creeping mist they vanished almost as soon as he saw them.

The sight of the mist brought his first feeling of uneasiness. It was flowing slowly down the valley like a gray tide, obscuring everything it touched. He tried running for a while, hoping to stay ahead of it. The effort was wasted; he was soon forced to stop for breath, and the chill gray tide crept over him.

Timor trudged on in the deepening grayness. He was trying to estimate how far he had walked when he heard a car approaching. Suddenly fearful that it might be his uncle coming for him, he stepped behind the nearest tree and stood waiting for it to pass.

It was not a car but a truck, as he soon realized by its rattle and the louder sound of its motor. Probably some farmer from the other side of the Gap. Maybe the driver would give him a ride. He was on the point of leaving his hiding place when the swinging lights, appearing around a bend, glowed through the mist and briefly illuminated the edge of the curving road ahead. Sudden shock went through him.

He had only a second's glimpse, but it was enough for him to make out the bulky figure of a man flattening against another tree hardly a dozen feet away.

The truck swept past. Its lights vanished around the next curve, and soon all sound of it was lost in the distance. Timor stood motionless, listening, not daring to move. In the gloom he could no longer distinguish the hiding figure, nor could he hear any stealthy movement above the rushing of the creek.

Some returning fisherman? Surely not here, at this hour. And why bother to hide? He had not seen the face clearly, but the figure had seemed vaguely familiar. Those heavy shoulders—did they belong to Brad James? Still, this had seemed to be a much larger man than the deputy.

Timor had been briefly warmed by his short run, but now he was shaking with cold as the chilling mist bit through his shirt. He couldn't just stand here.

Carefully he began edging away from the protective tree, wondering if the

man had seen him and could possibly be waiting for him to reappear. It was Timor's intention to circle cautiously aside before going on, but as he left the tree his eyes caught the vague gleam of a flashlight below the edge of the road on his right. The man had gone down the steep slope that fell away to the creek; now he seemed to be stooped over, playing his light along the rocks as if searching for something.

Searching for what?

Suddenly it occurred to Timor that he must be very close to the spot where old Wiley's truck had crashed. Could the man be looking for the thing Wiley had thrown away?

Timor moved closer to the road's edge. As he did so, his foot struck a loose stone, and it slid downward over an area of fresh gravel that had spilled over the slope. Instantly the searcher's light went out.

Timor crept stealthily away, then ran, thankful that the wild rushing of the stream masked his footsteps. He did not expect to be followed, nor was he; but the experience had been unnerving. Why would anyone be out looking for something at this time of the evening, and be so strangely secretive about it?

The gloom had deepened; presently he could not even make out the trees near at hand. He kept to the center of the road now, jogging along to keep warm and judging direction by the feel of the gravel under his feet. A car passed occasionally, heading for the Forks. Each time he hid again, fearful not only of his uncle, but of the unknown searcher who undoubtedly had had some means of transportation placed out of sight in one of the timber trails.

It was a great relief when he reached the lower valley; here the mist lay above the road, and soon he was able to recognize the vague shape of a farm building close on his left. The Forks lay around the next bend. Presently he saw the dim glow of lights at Grosser's store.

A few minutes later, shivering and nearly exhausted, he was huddled by the stove in Nathaniel's back room, soaking up the warmth of a wood fire and sipping hot coffee from a mug.

"Have you had anything to eat?" Nathaniel asked.

Timor shook his head. "I—there wasn't time."

"Eat first, then tell me about it. I know this is pretty important, or you wouldn't have walked here in the dark, and without a jacket."

A steaming plate of hash was set before him. Timor ate it gratefully. Finally he said, "I talked to Wiley again. Then—then I had trouble with my uncle."

"What about?"

Timor told him. "But Wiley wanted me to see you this evening, so I came anyway. He wants you to find out where Brad James and Rance Gatlin went that night after the accident, and how long it took them. Then he wants to know what Sammy Grosser did, and what time Shorty Malone and his partner came to work the next morning." He looked up curiously. "Who is Shorty Malone?"

"Oh, a sort of jack-of-all-trades. He usually drives a truck when he can get a job."

"Could—could he have been driving one of the gravel trucks parked by the diner that night?"

"Why, it's possible." Nathaniel got up, frowning. "That never occurred to me, but then I seldom saw the drivers. They left the trucks here, loaded and ready to

roll, and stopped by for them early the next morning. But they did that only for a few days, when they were working up your way.”

He found a telephone book, searched for a number, and lifted the receiver of the wall phone beside the filing cabinet. “Pray this thing still works. I haven’t paid my last bill ...”

The telephone was working, and presently Nathaniel was engaged in a long and involved conversation, most of which seemed to have nothing to do with the problem at hand. Timor, listening, realized Nathaniel was skillfully angling for information without ever asking a direct question.

Finally he hung up and looked thoughtfully at Timor. “Shorty is a talker, praise be. He’s given us most of the answers. He and the other driver picked up their trucks here at six that morning.”

“Isn’t that sort of early?” Timor asked.

“Not when it gives them a chance to get off early. That’s how they want it.” Nathaniel poured himself a mug of coffee and stood scowling at it. “Seems a lot happened that night that I didn’t hear about, being in the hospital. There was a jailbreak over in Tennessee, and our sheriff and his men had to set up road blocks and check all the cars crossing the mountains. It was a rough night for Rance Gatlin and Brad. Since they were already up on the Gap road because of Wiley, they were ordered to stay there and keep watch till morning. Shorty passed them coming back to the Forks when he took his first load up.”

Timor puzzled over this. It complicated everything.

“If your box was thrown into one of the trucks,” he said, “Rance Gatlin didn’t have a chance to get it afterward—if he was the one who put it there. But maybe Sammy got it.”

“Or one of the drivers—depending on which truck it was thrown in. If it was still in the truck in the morning, anyone would be bound to notice it the moment he opened the door. But somehow I don’t think it was Shorty. He’s about as honest as they come. As for the other man, Jackson ...”

“But—but he hasn’t got it,” Timor said quickly. “Or Sammy, or anyone else. I just remembered. Wiley said he’s been following people around for days, and that no one has the box!”

Nathaniel shook his head. “I don’t understand, Tim. If the box was tossed into one of the trucks, someone took it out. Even if it fell on the floor instead of the seat, you could hardly miss seeing it.”

“Maybe it wasn’t hidden in one of the trucks after all.”

Nathaniel sat down, his brow furrowed. He sipped from his mug, and began tapping his long fingers on the table. “Tim, just exactly what did Wiley tell you about the box?”

“Well, I asked him if he’d found out who has it, and he said: ‘Timmy, ain’t *nobody* got that box.’ Then he told me he’d been following everyone around, and looking everywhere, and that it was mighty queer. He was getting some ideas, he said, only he needed more information right away.”

“I see. Anything else?”

“Only—only the questions he wanted you to check for him. There was a lot I wanted to ask him, but his voice faded again.” He paused, and decided not to mention old Wiley’s warning. “Is there any way you can find out what Sammy Grosser did that night?”

Nathaniel made a wry face. "Sammy will be a problem, but I'll try. Everybody at Grosser's has been talking about your chair, so I'll go over and put in my two cents worth and see what I can dig up. But first I'd better take you home." He stood up and touched Timor on the shoulder. "I'm sorry about this trouble with your uncle, but it'll straighten out. Old army men are a little tough at times, but you can usually count on them in a pinch."

Timor said nothing. He dreaded going back and facing the colonel, nor had he any illusions about the future. You simply couldn't explain some matters to him. From now on, things were going to be difficult.

Swaddled in an old hunting coat, he huddled in Nathaniel's battered jeep while it crept through the mist. The mist had settled like an impenetrable blanket in the lower valley. But miraculously, as they climbed higher, they broke out of it entirely and the road became clear ahead. Suddenly Timor remembered what he had seen up here earlier.

"I forgot to tell you something," he said quickly. "I don't know exactly where I was when it happened, but it couldn't have been very far from the place where Wiley's truck crashed."

Nathaniel slowed, then stopped the jeep while Timor told about the hidden searcher. "I—I couldn't see his face," he said. "At first I thought it was Brad James, but he was too big."

"Sounds like Sammy Grosser," Nathaniel commented. "Sammy's the biggest fellow around here."

"But what would Sammy be looking for?"

"I don't know, Tim. It doesn't make sense. Of course, it could have been someone we don't know about, someone who still thinks my tin box is up here and hasn't been found. Was the fellow wearing a cap or a hat?"

"I believe he had on a cap."

"Then it must have been Sammy." Nathaniel shook his head, and drove on slowly. "I don't understand it and I don't like it. I'm afraid we've overlooked something. Tim, I don't trust either Sammy or Gatlin, so I want you to be careful. You may not realize it, but most people up in these mountains are rather superstitious, even though they won't admit it. That includes scoffers like Brad James, and almost certainly the Gatlins."

"Not Brad James!"

"Yes. If he even suspected the truth about your chair, he'd be scared to death of it. So you must understand that the guilty person may possibly begin to believe that you know much more about him than you actually do. And that could be dangerous."

"I—I suppose so."

At the private road leading to the bridge, Nathaniel said, "Would you like for me to come in and talk to the colonel? Maybe I can ease things a bit."

"Maybe you'd better not—he's probably in a bad mood. Thanks anyway." Timor got out, then added, "I don't know when I'll be able to see you again. If there's any more news, I'll have Odessa take it to you."

A feeling of lostness came over him as he watched Nathaniel drive away. Reluctantly he crossed the bridge and approached the cabin.

The colonel was seated by the fireplace, an unlighted pipe clenched between his teeth. He looked up stonily as Timor entered, and slowly placed the pipe on

the table beside him.

Odessa, hurrying in from the kitchen, glanced worriedly at Timor, and said, "Daddy, please ..."

"Keep out of this," the colonel told her shortly. And to Timor, "You took your time about returning, young man. Where have you been?"

Timor swallowed. "I—I had to see Mr. Battle, sir."

"What about?"

"It's hard to explain, sir. I—I just had to see him."

"If it's about Wiley, you've a lot of explaining to do. You deliberately disobeyed me. I'll not have that sort of thing."

Timor bit his lip, and remained silent.

The colonel surveyed him, his gaunt jaws hardening. "Tomorrow, when you've thought things over, we'll have a little talk. In the meantime you're not to leave this house without permission. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. Go to your room."

Runaway

TIMOR slept little that night. He dozed and wakened, beset with worries, plagued by questions. Only two more days remained, and Wiley's time would be up. How was he ever going to manage?

Once, long after the colonel had gone to bed, Odessa tapped softly on his door, opened it, and whispered, "Timmy, are you awake?"

"Yes."

"I—I'm awfully sorry about what happened. It's my fault, really. I shouldn't have told him about our visit to the Forks. But I was so afraid. Have you had anything to eat?"

"I'm all right. Nathaniel gave me something."

"Oh. Did you *have* to see him again?"

"Yes. Wiley had a message for him when I went back to the house, so I had to go."

"I didn't realize." She paused, then whispered earnestly, "Timmy, please don't be too upset over Daddy. He doesn't understand, and he had a bad day—he slipped and broke his rod on the way home, and lost his box of flies. Why don't you stay in bed in the morning, and it'll give me a chance to talk to him."

"All right."

After she had gone to her room he sat up and looked at the sassafras chair. In the darkness its glow was so faint that he could barely make it out. Even so, he whispered hopefully, "Mr. Pendergrass?"

Wiley didn't answer. The old man was probably far away somewhere, trying to run down a clue. And having trouble doing it, no doubt, considering he had to walk when he couldn't hitch a ride. It was all so strange ...

Wearily, Timor slid his small body down under the covers and tried to sleep.

Memory of the hidden watcher held him awake. A big man with heavy shoulders ... It almost had to be Sammy Grosser. Only, if Sammy were the guilty one—

It didn't make sense. As Nathaniel had said, they must have overlooked something. And it must be something very important ...

Sleep finally came, but only in snatches. Twice more during the night he sat up, looking at the chair, but its dim glow remained unchanged. When he dozed off for the last time the birds were beginning to sing their dawn chorus in the hemlocks beyond the window.

Odessa awakened him late in the morning. He got up and dressed disconsolately, a growing feeling of uneasiness creeping over him.

As he went into the living room Odessa said, "I've warmed up your breakfast. You'd better eat it before Daddy gets back."

Timor blinked at the clock over the fireplace. It was after ten. "W-where's Uncle Ira?"

"In town. He's been up for hours. He went to buy a new rod and some more flies. He—he told me to remind you that you were not to leave the house."

He sat down and began picking at his breakfast. "Did—did you have a chance to talk to him before he left?"

"I—" Odessa sat down on the other side of the table. She looked miserable. "I really tried, but—" All at once she clenched her hands angrily. "Oh, why does he have to be this way? He's so unbending! But maybe it's because he lived alone so long. Timmy, what happened last evening after you left?"

He started to tell her, but his attention was suddenly diverted by the sight of a car coming over the bridge. He frowned at it through the window. It was a yellow sports car with the top down.

"We're getting a visitor," he said, and wondered why the appearance of a strange car in the yard should trouble him so.

The man who got out of it was slender, youngish in spite of his gray hair, and he was wearing an expensive yellow jacket that matched the color of the car. He slung the strap of a camera over his shoulder and strode lightly up to the porch. The word *newspaperman* flashed through Timor's mind, and he felt a sinking sensation.

Odessa answered the stranger's knock.

"Miss Hamilton?"

To Timor, the voice was calculatedly pleasant, as was the smile that went with it. There was a falseness about it that added to his uneasiness.

"I'm Odessa Hamilton."

"I'm Si LeGrande," the caller said, bowing slightly. "Feature writer for *Southeastern News*. I'm sure you've noticed my articles in some of the papers. You paint, I understand. In fact, I believe you had a very notable exhibition in Washington recently."

"I exhibited in Washington last winter," Odessa admitted.

"It is a pleasure to meet such a talented painter," Mr. LeGrande went on. "Sometime I must do a special feature on you. At present, however, I'm working on a mountain series. Strange stories, legends, that sort of thing. Yesterday I was visiting the editor of the local paper, and I was told that one member of your family has come into possession of a most unusual chair. Would you mind if I took a picture of it?"

Odessa stood speechless for a moment. She glanced with stricken eyes at Timor, who was now standing beside her. Timor felt as if the roof had fallen upon him.

Suddenly Odessa smiled sweetly. "Why, Mr. LeGrande, I've no idea what you heard, but you know how silly most gossip is. People can start with nothing whatever and build up the most ridiculous tales!" She managed a very convincing laugh. "Really, I wouldn't waste any time on Timmy's chair, if I were you. It's just an ordinary chair."

"But made of sassafras," Mr. LeGrande persisted, with a slight tilt of his head. "Ah, that makes a difference! It is probably the *only* sassafras chair in the world. And everyone in these parts knows that sassafras isn't like other woods. Furthermore, I understand it was made by one of the most disreputable

characters in the mountains, and that it arrived here in a very mysterious manner. Surely, Miss Hamilton, you'll have to admit that we have here the ingredients of a most extraordinary feature. It's something everyone would enjoy reading, and of course no publicity ever hurt a rising painter."

"I—I'm afraid my father will have to be the judge of that," Odessa answered. "Here he is now."

Timor, glancing past Mr. LeGrande, saw the station wagon flash over the bridge and swing to a quick stop beside the yellow sportster. The colonel got out and stalked up to them with his head outthrust.

One look at him, and Timor's spirits plummeted. Though it hardly showed on the surface, he knew his uncle was seething with fury.

Mr. LeGrande was not immediately aware of this as he introduced himself to the colonel, but he soon realized it when he began talking about the chair, and mentioned taking photographs.

"Request denied!" the colonel snapped. "I'll not have you or anyone else taking pictures of that confounded chair. I heard enough about it when I was in town. Of all the ridiculous tales! How they ever got started!" He stopped, his eyes going flintily to Timor, then he said coldly, "I'm sorry, Mr. LeGrande, but I'll have to ask you to leave. I have private business to discuss with my family."

Mr. LeGrande shrugged, murmured his regrets, and departed with a faint smile on his face.

In the cabin, Colonel Hamilton produced a folded newspaper and threw it on the table. "Read that," he ordered in a tight voice. "The Tattler's column."

The paper was folded back to the familiar column in question. Timor read it over Odessa's shoulder:

"Here is a juicy bit that reached our desk just before press time. The story goes that a chair made of sassafras is really loaded when it comes to magic. If you don't believe it, ask one of our young summer residents. Seems he found such a chair in his room the other evening, and it told him all kinds of things we'd rather not repeat. Might be nice to have such a chair—were it not for the doubtful characters one might find sitting in it at midnight."

"Oh dear!" gasped Odessa. "How did that ever ..."

"That isn't all," grated the colonel. "Everywhere I went this morning, someone was talking or laughing about it. What I heard is past belief. Now I come home and find a prying newspaper hawk camped on my doorstep."

He glared at Timor. "Young man, you've some explaining to do. Let's have it."

Timor wet his lips. This was a showdown, and he could think of no way of escaping it.

"I—I guess it started with Brad James," he began. "He—he's one of the deputies at the sheriff's office. Yesterday he overheard me telling Nathaniel Battle about the chair."

"And what did you tell this fellow Battle?"

Timor swallowed. He felt a little sick. "Uncle Ira, I told him what I had to tell him. I mean, it was only the truth."

"The truth about what?"

"The chair—and Wiley."

"Just what is the truth?" the colonel demanded. "Out with it!"

"You—you wouldn't believe me if—if I told you," Timor stammered.

"It isn't a question of what *I* believe! I know what I heard. Now I want the facts from you!"

Timor closed his eyes and gave a silent prayer. Then he drew a deep breath and straightened. "The other night I thought I heard Wiley trying to call me, but I couldn't see, or even hear him plainly till he sat in the chair. There's something special about that chair, because when Wiley sat in it he became as plain as day. He's trying to find Mr. Battle's box, and—and he wanted me to help him. So that's what I've been doing."

Colonel Hamilton stared at him in stark silence for long seconds. Then a strangling sound came from his throat. Suddenly he rasped, "Of all the crazy nonsense! This is positively ridiculous! It's the most utterly and completely ridiculous yarn I've ever heard! Tim, I thought you had a good head on your shoulders, but something's either wrong with it, or you've turned into a liar. I prefer to think you've had a hallucination."

Timor said stubbornly, "I can't help what you think, sir. I know what I heard and saw. Anyway, what's wrong with Wiley trying to get me to help him—especially if I'm the only person he's able to get in touch with? Just because we're in America where people don't ..."

"Stop it!" roared the colonel. "I've heard enough! Not another word out of you about that rascal Wiley or the chair."

"But ..."

"Take that thing out of the house and get rid of it!"

"B-but it's my chair! Wiley made it for me. He—"

"You heard me!"

"Daddy, please," Odessa pleaded. "It's Timmy's chair. It isn't right to make him —"

"You keep out of this," the colonel snapped. "If Tim doesn't get rid of that chair this minute, I'll take it out myself and break it up and burn it. Tim, I've given you an order. How long is it going to take you to obey it?"

Trembling, Timor ran to his room. He picked up the sassafras chair and carried it outside. Blindly he went stumbling away with it through the trees.

Once, far behind him, he heard Odessa call, but he did not stop. He plunged on, dragging or carrying the precious chair through thickets and over rocks, hardly noticing or caring where he went so long as he put distance between himself and the cabin. A great deal of distance.

When he halted at last, panting with exertion, he could hear only forest sounds around him. There was no level place to put the chair, so he let it lay where he had stopped, and slumped down beside it.

Now what should he do?

He couldn't leave the chair here in the woods, uncared for. As for returning to the cabin and facing his uncle ...

"I won't go back," he muttered. "I won't do it."

At least not today. Tomorrow, maybe, after he'd figured a few things out. If he got hungry, he could find food in the woods. Old Wiley had taught him something about that. But how was he going to manage to stay in touch with Nathaniel?

Suddenly Timor realized how foolish he had been. Instead of running away blindly, he should have crossed the bridge and headed for the Forks. The proper

place for the chair was at Nathaniel's shop. It would be safe there, and he could stay with Nathaniel till the box was found.

All at once he sat up, thinking of Wiley. Wiley's time would be up tomorrow. How could they possibly find the box so soon? But somehow it must be done. Tomorrow was Saturday, and in a few more days—unless they could locate the box—Nathaniel would lose everything. Nathaniel, and the Connors too. He had never met the Connors, but he felt sorry for them.

Timor got to his feet. The thing to do, he decided, would be to hide the chair at a convenient spot near the road, then hike to the Forks. He and Nathaniel could pick up the chair later in the jeep.

Only, where was he now?

He turned slowly around, trying to get his bearings. He couldn't be very far from the cabin, perhaps only a few hundred yards. Had he gone upstream? No, he must have taken the path that led to the spring, and left it somewhere when the going got too steep. The creek, surely, would be down the slope on his right.

Somewhere he could hear water running. Strangely, though, the sound seemed to be coming from his left.

Again he turned around. From where he stood the ground sloped away in two directions, then shot up on all sides to heights unseen through the dense forest growth. He could not recall ever having been in this spot before. But surely that must be the familiar creek he heard. He hoisted the chair upon his back and began making his way downward toward the sound.

A few minutes later he stopped, bewildered, blinking at a small waterfall that came tumbling over a ledge. From it a tiny stream gurgled away through a dark tangle of rhododendrons.

Hadn't Wiley once mentioned a waterfall somewhere over beyond his shack? This must be it. But where was Wiley's place from here?

It was impossible to guess. This was such strange up-and-down country, full of hidden coves and little twisting valleys that ran in every direction. Wiley had cautioned him about going on hikes and straying too far from any familiar area. "Take the wrong turn," Wiley had once said, "an' a feller can get himself lost in no time. 'Tain't like the flat lands down on the coast. Up here, once you lose sight of the main valley, you ain't got no roads or nothin' to guide you. It's mainly national forest, an' some of it's mighty wild."

This part of it looked very wild, and it seemed incredible that he could be so near his uncle's place and not know where it was. In his flight he must have taken too many turns and come farther than he'd thought. He placed the chair on the edge of a mossy log, so that it sat level, and looked at it with sudden hope.

"Mr. Pendergrass?" he called.

After a few minutes of calling and waiting, he knew it was no use. Anyway, how would Wiley know where to find him? If the old man had to use shank's ponies and hitch rides to get around, he was probably miles away.

Timor sat down in the chair and tried to think. Wouldn't the sun give direction? He glanced up through the green tangle, but all he could see was a tiny patch of darkening sky. It looked like rain.

Well, there was another solution. Water runs downhill, and Wiley had said if you followed any stream long enough you were bound to come out near a road. And didn't all the streams in this area run into the same creek? Of course!

With the chair hoisted on his small shoulders, the back of it resting on his head, Timor began following the curving stream. He had to stay on the slope well above it to avoid the tangles, and the going was hard and painfully slow. There was no trail, and the ungainly chair was forever bumping into trees and shrubs. More than once, as it became heavier with passing time, he considered leaving it under a tree and returning for it later. But that would never do. If he lost it, he might search for days without finding it.

Timor did not have a watch and it was hard to judge the creeping hours, but finally there came a moment of exhaustion when he felt he could go no farther. He dropped the chair and sank down beside it, shivering in the drizzling rain that was beginning to fall. It had been chilly when he got up this morning, and fortunately he had put on a heavy shirt. Yet it was little protection against rain.

"Hari busuk!" he muttered, lapsing disconsolately into Malay with an expression he used only when everything had gone wrong. Why hadn't he headed straight for Nathaniel's? How foolish he'd been! It was getting late, and he would soon be soaked through. Where could he spend the night?

Then, above the slow patter of rain dripping from the leaves, he became aware of another sound. A distant rushing ...

Abruptly he was on his feet again, tugging at the chair. Minutes later he went scrambling down over a jumble of moss-covered boulders, dragging the chair behind him. The rain was increasing, but he hardly noticed it. Before him was the creek, and directly on his left where the tiny stream entered it, was an immense yellow rock with a log across it.

Timor gave a sigh of relief. This was a spot he remembered well, for he'd fished here often last summer. It was all of a mile from his uncle's place, though little more than a hundred yards from old Wiley's shack.

Seng Hunter

WILEY'S SHACK was a one-room affair with a small porch in front that faced the creek, and an open shed on the side that had been used as a workshop. So thick was the growth around the place that a chance visitor could approach within a hundred feet of it and hardly suspect its presence.

Timor, stumbling along the overgrown path at the rear, reached the shed first and set his precious burden down by the workbench. For a moment he stood leaning wearily against the bench, so thankful for having reached his haven that he was hardly aware of being soaked to the skin. Then a sudden fit of shivering reminded him that the day—what was left of it—was turning colder by the minute. He'd better get inside and build a fire.

From the shed a small door opened into a corner of the shack. He tried the latch, and found it was securely barred on the inside. He hurried around to the porch and tried the heavy front door. It too was barred. For an instant he wondered how Rance Gatlin had entered—for surely the deputy had broken in somehow. Hadn't Gatlin mentioned that, in searching for Wiley's keys, he'd found none inside the place?

Timor shook his head, and began groping under the steps. Finally his exploring fingers closed upon a short but heavy piece of wire with a hook at one end. On the porch again, he thrust the hook into an all-but-hidden crack in the wall, turned it carefully, and drew it out. The hook brought with it the end of a rawhide thong. A quick jerk of the thong, a pressure on the latch, and the stout door creaked open.

His teeth were chattering with the chill as he stumbled forward in the cabin's dimness and crouched by the fireplace. Kindling and wood were already in place, awaiting a match—a circumstance that seemed strange, though he was too tired to give it more than fleeting thought. His unsteady hand found a match in the wooden matchbox on the right, but it sputtered out in the rainwater that ran down his arms. He was more careful with the next match, and presently flames were leaping up from the kindling.

When the fire was blazing brightly he brought the sassafras chair inside, then closed and barred both doors, stripped off his sodden clothing, and wrapped himself in a blanket from the foot of the bed.

Timor was too exhausted for thought as he slumped down before the fireplace. The chair wasn't heavy, but his arms ached from carrying it so long, and his whole body throbbed after the unaccustomed exertion of scrambling over rough country.

Gradually the fire's warmth went through him and his head began to nod ...

When he opened his eyes he found he was curled up by the hearth, with only

his face exposed in the cocoon of the blanket. The fire had died to a glowing mass of embers. He got up stiffly, threw more wood on the fire, then unbarred the front door and glanced out.

It was black night outside. The rain had stopped, though moisture still dripped from the trees. A few yards away the swollen creek rushed past with a steady roaring.

Suddenly realizing he was very hungry, Timor closed the door and lighted the old kerosene lamp that was in its accustomed place on the table. For the first time he peered about him curiously.

The place, with its handmade furniture, and familiar herbs hanging from the rafters, looked exactly as he'd seen it last. But if Rance Gatlin had broken in to search through Wiley's things, the room would have been left in disorder. It was hard to imagine either of the deputies bothering to clean up their litter. Yet the tiny cabin was as spotlessly clean as if Wiley had just stepped out of it. The bed was carefully made, the dishes were washed and stacked on the shelf, the floor had been swept recently, and all the clothing put away in the corner cupboard. Even the woodbox was piled high with fresh wood and kindling.

Who could have done all this?

Timor glanced at the sassafras chair. The golden wood was glowing in the firelight. He watched it in sudden hope, praying that Wiley would appear and tell him what had been going on. At the moment nothing would have made him feel better than to see and talk to his old friend again. But the chair remained empty, and the only sounds that could be heard were the steady roaring of the creek, the crackling of the fire, and a small noise as if some night creature were on the prowl outside.

Then Timor went rigid. Something was on the porch, something large, for it was heavy enough to make one of the boards creak. Someone was out there, moving stealthily up to the door.

He stared at the door, and felt a quick stab of fright as he saw that he'd forgotten to slide the bar in place. A faint click drew his eyes to the ancient latch. Terror mounted in him as he watched the latch slowly rise with the pressure of the unknown hand on the other side.

It was too late to leap forward and thrust the bar into its slot. He snatched up the only weapon in reach—one of Wiley's old walking sticks standing beside the fireplace—and managed to cry out boldly, "Who's there? What do you want?"

He heard a surprised grunt, and the door swung open. A gaunt figure in patched overalls stood on the threshold. The narrow face that stared uncertainly back at him from under a shapeless hat was grim, youngish, unshaven, and somehow very familiar. Then he realized it was the ginseng hunter he had glimpsed here last year.

"Oh—it's you!" Timor said at last. "You sort of scared me."

"Didn't aim to." The grim face relaxed a trifle. "You kinda had me worried. You—you're that Hamilton boy, ain't you?"

"I'm Tim Hamilton."

"You been here long?"

"Since just before dark. Why?"

"That feller Battle at the Forks, he come up here lookin' for you. Reckon he just missed you."

"Nathaniel? He was looking for me?"

"Yeah. Folks are saying you done run off an' got yourself lost. They're gettin' up a search party down at the Hamilton place now."

Timor's mouth fell open with shock. He should have realized this would happen. He felt a little sick.

The ginseng hunter was scowling at him. "Never figgered it was you in here. Reckon I'd better go back an' tell them people where you are."

"No!" Timor burst out. "Please don't! I can't go home tonight. I just can't."

"How come?"

"I—I've something to do here. It's terribly important."

The hunter shrugged. "Well, I ain't exactly itchin' to go back. I was on my way over the Gap, an' I promised that Battle feller I'd stop by an' have another look ..."

Sound died in the ginseng hunter's throat. His widening eyes were fastened on the sassafras chair. Timor had been standing in front of it, but as he stepped aside to replace Wiley's stick, the chair was suddenly exposed to full view. The yellow wood glowed strangely in the firelight.

The gaunt hunter gave a strangled gasp. "Y-you brung it back here!"

Timor blinked at him. "Are you the one who left it in my room the other night, with the key?"

"Yeah." The man had backed into the door; it closed behind him and now he flattened against it, his grim face tightening. "Ain't you afraid of it?"

"Of course not! Wiley was my friend. Why should I be afraid of a chair he made for me?"

"B-but it glows—an' sometimes it glows a heap too bright to be natural."

"Sure. Wiley always said there was something special in the wood—and there is. He's proved it."

The hunter swallowed. "Then it's true—all the talk that's goin' around? That you seen Wiley in the chair—an'—an' he told you things?"

Timor nodded silently.

The man swallowed again. "I knowed it was true. I just knowed it. That chair always worried me. Then the other night it started glowin' terrible bright in the firelight. Sure gave me an awful turn. Figgered Wiley was after me about what I done. I done him wrong, I reckon. Real wrong. I just couldn't stand it, so I started to throw the chair in the creek—then I remembered Wiley sayin' he'd made it for you. So I took it over to your place an' left it." The hunter paused, and asked, "W-why did you bring it back?"

"I had to." Timor explained while he spread his sodden clothes on a bench nearer the fire. "So you see," he finished, "there's nothing about the chair to be afraid of. Wiley's trying to help."

"Mebbe he is, but it don't make me feel no better about it. Has—has Wiley told you anything about me?"

"I—I'm not sure," said Timor, thinking quickly. "What's your name?"

The gaunt man hesitated. "Folks around here, they call me Joey Jackson."

Timor's heart skipped a beat. "Are you the Jackson that was working with Shorty Malone at the time of the accident?"

"Yeah. Me an' Shorty drove trucks for a little while, haulin' gravel up this way. First job I'd had in a long spell. I hunt for seng, mainly, but you can't find it after

it loses its leaves and berries.”

Timor, still clutching his blanket about him, sat down on the edge of the bench. His hunger was momentarily forgotten. Remembering the man’s hesitation over his name, he asked, “Jackson isn’t your real name, is it?”

The ginseng hunter glanced uneasily at the chair and moistened his lips. “Jackson’s part of it. The whole thing’s Joey Jackson Pendergrass, but Wiley figgered I’d make out better gettin’ a job if nobody knowed I was his relation. Folks think, because a feller’s a Pendergrass ...”

Timor gaped at him. Then he exclaimed, “I didn’t know Wiley had a relative!”

“Reckon I’m the onliest one left,” Joey mumbled. “Pa, he died last winter, so there’s just me. He was Wiley’s cousin.”

“Oh.” Timor considered this a moment, then continued, “If you’re Wiley’s only relative, then this place belongs to you.”

“Yeah. Sure would like to live here, but I can’t claim it.”

“Why not?”

“Too many things gone wrong.”

“What things?”

“Just—just things.”

“You mean about the robbery and all?”

“Yeah.”

“Why don’t you tell me about it?” Timor urged. “It may help us both.” He looked knowingly at the chair. “There hasn’t been time to ask Wiley much about you ...”

Joey stole a sidelong glance at the chair and shifted his feet. Timor held his breath, almost expecting the hunter to bolt into the night. As he watched the tight, unshaven face, he realized Joey was much younger than he appeared. Why, he’s hardly as old as Odessa, Timor thought.

“I—I reckon if I don’t tell you, Wiley will,” Joey said at last. “But you gotta promise you won’t let on to them deputies. I don’t trust ‘em.”

“Of course I promise. I feel the same way about them.”

Joey drew a deep breath. “The trouble is, I was with Wiley that night. H-he’d do anything for a feller. Even used to buy up seng from needy folks, an’ pay more’n he could sell it for. Anyway, he took me down to the Forks that night.” Joey paused. He looked miserable.

Timor managed not to show his astonishment. “No one saw you at the Forks. Where were you?”

“I—I was hidin’ back in them pines where Wiley parked his truck. You see, it was this way: Pa, he used to make likker when we couldn’t find seng. When he died, there wasn’t no money to pay for things, an’ all I had was some of his likker. My car was broke down, so I got Wiley to haul the stuff to the Forks. While I unloaded it, he went to see the feller that was buyin’ it. The reason he come runnin’ back an’ drove away so fast was to make them deputies chase him. If they hadn’t chased him, they’d ‘a’ caught me with that likker. Then I’d ‘a’ lost the job I’d just got, an’ I’d be in jail now.”

Timor could only shake his head. He was beyond words.

Joey gulped. Suddenly he burst out defensively, “I know what you’re thinkin’—that I could ‘a’ saved Wiley from being blamed for that robbery. But what was a feller to do in my place?”

"I don't know. But if you were hiding in the pines when Mr. Battle was being robbed, you must have seen ..."

"But I *did* see, an' that's the worst part."

"You—you know who did it?" Timor asked quickly.

"Sure I know. Leastways, I know it had to be one of two fellers—mebbe both of 'em. If I'd been watchin' more careful ..., but I was waitin' for Wiley, see, an' wasn't payin' no mind to Battle's place. But I noticed that Grosser feller—what's his name?"

"Sammy?"

"Yeah. That Sammy was out back there for a minute. Then the next time I looked I seen Deputy Gatlin headin' for the gravel trucks that Shorty Malone an' me had left near the diner."

"Did you notice if Mr. Gatlin threw anything in one of the trucks?"

Joey shook his head. "I was wonderin' about Wiley, an' didn't have no notion somethin' was wrong till somebody started shoutin' an' Wiley come runnin'. I was scared to hang around after he left, so I walked down to Shorty's house where I had a room at the time. I—I didn't hear about what happened to Wiley till the next mornin', when Shorty an' me went to work." Joey paused, and swallowed. "It—it sure shook me up bad. An' the worst of it was I couldn't tell nobody what I knowed. Who'd believe me? Specially if it was Gatlin that did it."

Timor nodded slowly. "If it was Deputy Gatlin ..."

"I wouldn't have a chance," muttered Joey. "That feller, he'd like as not kill me if he thought I knowed. An' lemme tell you somethin': if he's the one, you ain't safe either. Everybody's sayin' that Wiley's come back to tell you what happened at the Forks, so that you're bound to know the truth. If I was you, I wouldn't be hidin' here plum' alone. You'd be better off at your uncle's place where there's folks around."

"No," said Timor. "I've got to stay here with the chair."

Joey shifted his feet nervously. "Well, if you're plum' bent on stayin', I reckon you'll be all right till mornin'. You get hungry, there's some canned stuff on them shelves." His hand groped for the door latch, and he added, "If—if anybody comes, you better not put no trust in these doors. Them deputies, they broke down the back door gettin' in. This place was a pure mess when I come back here. Took me three days to repair things an' clean it up."

Timor watched him open the door. A little chill crept through him at the prospect of being left alone. "You—you have to go?"

Joey's eyes crept once more to the chair; he flinched and turned quickly away. "I—I'd better. Got a job over the Gap now, takin' care of them summer cabins ..." He almost ran out into the night.

Timor barred the door and stood uncertainly by the hearth while he tried to get his thoughts in order. Through his mind flashed a picture of Nathaniel hunting for him, of the search party being organized, and of Odessa's worried face. He really ought to tell Odessa where he was hiding. If he could manage to see her without the colonel knowing ...

Frowning, he examined his clothes, and rearranged them on the bench to dry better. Then hunger drove him to the shelf where several cans were stacked. He opened a can of black-eyed peas, warmed it in the fireplace, and used a spoon to eat directly from the can. He was washing up in the icy spring water piped to the

sink when he heard his name called.

He whirled. The sassafras chair was glowing, and old Wiley, gasping and wheezing, was just sitting down in it.

"Thank Pete an' bless Joe," Wiley muttered. "The time I had findin' you! Lemme get my breath ..."

"Oh, I'm glad you're here," Timor began. "I ..."

"If you had to run off, why in the blue thunderation didn't you go to Nathaniel's? Ain't you got no sense, Timmy?"

"I—I wasn't thinking. Everything went wrong. I had more trouble with Uncle Ira, and he ordered me to get rid of the chair. After I left I sort of got lost."

"So I figgered. Ding blatt it, I been here five times today."

"Five times! You must be awfully tired, Mr. Pendergrass."

"Nope. I'm kinda getting the hang of things. Never had no trouble squeezin' past a locked door, or seein' in the dark, but when a feller like me has to hitch rides ... Anyway, I'm learnin' how to zip along a little. Sure saves the feet, but it's rough on the rest of me." He took a long breath, then wheezed out, "Timmy, I just come from your uncle's place. You know what's happenin'?"

"The search party? Joey Jackson just told me about it."

"Eh? Joey's been here?" Wiley's gnarled hands clutched the chair arms. "You get him to talk to you?"

Timor nodded quickly. "He admitted he was at the Forks with you that night. He's still pretty scared about it."

Old Wiley grunted. "Joey, he's a good lad, but he scares easy. The trouble I had, making 'im carry the chair over to your place! Timmy, I—I hated to tell you about that likker business. It ain't a nice thing to talk about, an' poor Joey, he was in a pure pickle. Didn't know how we could get his side of it, him bein' a stranger around here, an' not much for talk. Did—did he tell you if he seen anything that night?"

Timor repeated what Joey had told him.

Wiley's sapphire eyes were glittering. "I'm gettin' close to something—mighty close. Now, I missed on makin' it to Nathaniel's when you went back there. What did he learn?"

As Timor went over his second visit to the shop, the old man's wizened face began to pucker. Suddenly he muttered, "By Dooley, there's something wrong! Sure as Simon, it was that Gatlin rascal who robbed Nathaniel—he's as ornery as a bob-tailed weasel, just like his brother. But, what's happened to the box? He ain't got it, an' his brother ain't got it either, or I'd 'a' found it for sure."

"Maybe he put it in Joey's truck, and Joey found it the next morning before Mr. Gatlin got back to the Forks. Do—do you think Joey could have hidden it somewhere, and is afraid to say anything about it?"

"Nope," Wiley said emphatically. "Joey couldn't hide nothin' from me. Anyway, if he'd found it, he wouldn't 'a' slept till he'd sneaked it back to Nathaniel. There's something else, but I can't quite put my finger on it."

"What about the man I saw searching along the road? Was it Sammy Grosser?"

"Yep. He's been out searchin' near every night. Sammy, he's pigheaded. I figger he's fool enough to think it was Nathaniel's box I threwed from the truck when Gatlin was after me, an' that it ain't never been found."

Timor considered this a moment, then shook his head. "Mr. Pendergrass, I

think you're wrong about Sammy. But first, what was it you threw out of the truck?"

Old Wiley looked uncomfortable. "Pshaw, Timmy, it was just my cough medicine."

"Your cough medicine!"

"Yep. My cough was bad that night, so I took the medicine along in a little glass jar, but I couldn't afford to have them deputies catch me with it. You see, it come out of one o' Joey's jugs."

"Oh!" Timor almost burst out laughing. Finally he said thoughtfully, "Mr. Pendergrass, if Sammy was sneaking around the back of Nathaniel's place that night, he'd know very well you didn't take the box. What's more, if he didn't take it himself, he—he'd be bound to know who did. So, what is it he keeps looking for along the road?"

Wiley gaped at him. "Blessed if I know. If the box got lost on the road somehow, you'd think Gatlin would be lookin' for it too. But Gatlin ain't never been out searchin'. By Dooley, I know I ain't figgered him wrong—but I sure done some wrong figgerin' somewhere."

The old man sat scowling a moment while he slowly pounded one fist against the chair arm. Abruptly he said, "Time's passin'. I better start trackin' this down fast, while I still got my juice an' cackle." He stood up, started to fade, then clutched the chair again. "Timmy, don't stay here tonight. Go back to your uncle's—it'd be a heap better, an' you don't want folks to worry."

"But—"

"Do like I say. But before you go, you'd better hide the chair."

"Hide it? You really think—"

"You're tootin' right I think it better be hidden. Joey, he ain't the only person scared of it by now. The word's out that you got a talkin' chair that tells secrets, an' there's plenty folks with a bad conscience would like to take an ax to it. By mornin' there'll be some of 'em lookin' for it here."

"Do you think it'll be safe in your barn?"

"Nope. Put it in them bushes behind my spring. You'll need a flashlight—there oughta be one in the table drawer. An', Timmy, you be mighty careful goin' home. Don't let nobody see you ..."

Wiley faded suddenly away.

Sammy

FOR A MOMENT after Wiley had gone, Timor stood blinking unhappily at the chair. He suddenly dreaded the hours ahead. Return and stay at his uncle's place? No, he couldn't face the colonel again, at least not tonight. Yet the search party ought to be stopped. He must slip back and manage somehow to see Odessa.

But first the chair must be hidden.

Hurriedly he began to dress. His shirt was still too damp to wear; after a quick search in the cupboard he found a clean one of Wiley's, and an old jacket which he drew on over it. The jacket swaddled him, though it was comfortable enough with the sleeves rolled up.

The flashlight was in the table drawer. He tested it and found that the battery was still good. Unbarring the back door, he opened it cautiously and stood listening to the night; finally he carried the chair into the shed and closed the door behind him.

Wiley's spring lay several hundred feet away, on the slope behind the tumbledown barn that had not been used in years. With the chair balanced over his head, Timor set out warily through the dark, following the overgrown path leading to the barn. Every movement of the light brought the shapes of twisted trees leaping into view, and unpleasant shadows that seemed to crawl threateningly all about him. Fearful that the light might attract attention, he kept it at an angle and began using it sparingly. Near the barn he paused. The path here was muddy from the rain. Mindful of telltale footprints, he circled away from the barn and kept to the woods until he reached the slope. He found the spring at last, and carefully thrust the chair into the rhododendron thicket above it.

Relieved, yet missing the comfort that the chair somehow gave him, he retraced his steps to the path. A few yards from the cabin he stopped, wondering which would be the best route to his uncle's place.

Directly on his right, winding through the blackness on this side of the creek, lay the old wagon trail, now overgrown with small trees. It was the way he had usually taken when visiting Wiley, and it would hardly be overlooked by anyone searching for him. Maybe it would be safer to cross the footbridge and use the road on the other side. He would have to hide from cars, but he doubted that anyone would be watching for him in that direction.

Timor had reached the little bridge spanning the creek when he remembered that he had left Wiley's lamp burning on the table, and the back door unbarred.

He turned back, hurried through the shed, entered the rear door and slid the bar in place. To leave, he would have to use the front door, and manipulate the

bar on the outside by means of the wire hook and a second thong.

Timor found the hook, blew out the lamp, and unbarred the front door. He was on the point of leaving when he thought of the blanket he had used earlier. He slipped the hook and flashlight into his jacket pocket, rolled up the blanket quickly, and threw it across his shoulder as he headed for the door.

Too late he heard the stealthy tread on the front porch. He leaped for the bar, but a heavy hand thrust the door open in his face.

Timor staggered backward, staring with sudden terror at the hulking figure that nearly filled the doorway. In the dim red glow from the fire the broad face under the cap was hardly recognizable as belonging to Sammy Grosser.

"W-what do you want.?" Timor stammered.

Sammy did not answer immediately. He moved inside, kicking the door closed behind him; his mouth worked soundlessly as his little eyes darted about the shadowed room. There were several chairs in the cabin, two of them graceful ladderbacks Wiley had made. Sammy's gaze fastened on one, newer than the other.

"Is that it?" he demanded, his voice oddly tight and hoarse. Without waiting for a reply he snatched up the chair, raised it high and smashed it against the floor. Then he leaped upon it, stamping it to pieces under his boots. Breathing rapidly, he backed away from the wreckage, a look of almost frightened satisfaction twisting his features.

Timor glared at him, shaking with sudden fury and disgust. "You—you've no right to destroy other people's things!" he burst out.

"You'd kill a snake, wouldn't you?" Sammy muttered. "That thing's worse'n a snake, but it won't be tellin' no more tales!"

"What are you so afraid of?" Timor cried angrily. "Did you rob Nathaniel?"

"No, I never robbed 'im! Who says I did?"

"You were seen there that night."

Sammy glowered at him, and licked his lips. "Who says he seen me?"

But the moment the words were out he gulped, and fright widened his little eyes. "Honest," he pleaded. "I can't help what W-wiley told you, but I swear I never took that box! I swear it!"

"But you wanted it, and you know who did take it," Timor insisted. "And you know it wasn't Wiley."

Sammy swallowed again, but he refused to speak.

Timor found himself asking, "Does the man who took it know what you've been doing every night? You—you've been seen out along the road, searching ..."

"No—no!" Sammy backed away, badly shaken. His foot touched a splintered slat from the broken chair and he kicked at it savagely. The slat flew across the hearth into the glowing coals. As it caught fire he stared at it in a sort of horror, as if suddenly realizing the enormity of allowing this particular bit of wood to burn. Abruptly he lunged to the fireplace and snatched the piece out.

His face went blank with surprise. Slowly his jaws knotted. "This ain't sassafras. It—it's just plain hickory."

He hurled the fragment back into the fire and turned furiously on Timor. "You tricked me! Where's the chair Wiley made for you? What'd you do with it?"

Timor edged away, retreating behind the table.

"Where is it?" Sammy ground out. "You tell me, or I'll make you wish you was dead."

Timor dodged the clutching fingers and raced around the table to the door. He managed to jerk it open just as Sammy's big paw came down on his shoulder. He felt the blanket being jerked from him, then he was free and running blindly into the night.

Behind him a light swept the trees. Timor dropped to the ground and crawled to the nearest trunk and crouched behind it, trembling. As the light moved closer he tried vainly to slow his frightened breathing, which seemed loud enough to be heard above the clatter of the creek. The light stopped, swung about, and began angling in what he guessed was the direction of the bridge. Presently it vanished in the thick growth.

Timor got up and began feeling his way cautiously through the blackness. It was reassuring to hear the creek on his left. That meant he was heading downstream, following the old wagon trail. It would be foolish to turn back now and risk crossing the bridge. Sammy must have come that way if he had driven up from the Forks, and would surely be waiting somewhere near the bridge, watching for him to cross.

Timor drew out his flashlight, but it was long minutes before he dared use it, and then only with cautious flickers. Save for the slender young poplar trees that had grown up in the trail, the route was fairly easy, if winding. As the danger from behind lessened, he began puzzling over what he had learned.

He was sure now that Sammy hadn't taken the box. But if Sammy had seen Gatlin take it, why all the searching for something along the road? If the box was lost, wouldn't Deputy Gatlin and his brother be looking for it too? What had happened to the box if neither of the Gatlins had it?

Timor stopped, suddenly forgetful of the uncertain blackness pressing about him. In spite of what Wiley thought—and Wiley had been wrong before—had they all made a mistake about the deputy? Was someone else involved, someone they hadn't even thought of? As Nathaniel had said, they'd certainly overlooked something. Even Wiley admitted that. What could it be?

Somewhere in the back of his mind Timor could feel the answer lurking. It was like a hidden trout in a shadowed pool. If he could only reach out and get closer to it.... He closed his eyes and tried hard to bring the overlooked thing into view, but the effort only drove it farther away. Answers, he'd learned, usually came to him unbidden. It didn't help to strain over them.

He opened his eyes to the reality of the dark, and stiffened as a light swept through the trees ahead.

Timor crouched and scrambled quickly out of the trail. Instinctively he had turned to his right, where the ground sloped upward through heavy timber. Stealthily he began crawling over the sodden leaf mold, groping in the blackness for a hiding place. His hand touched what seemed to be a stump or a dead tree, and he managed to squirm behind it just as the exploring light flicked along the slope.

Presently he heard the low murmur of voices, then the crunch of damp twigs near him on the trail. Two men were talking. One muttered, "He never come this way. Reckon we ought to go on to Wiley's?"

"We'd better," the other advised. "He'll cut over in this direction if he ain't

lost.”

“You don’t believe he’s lost?”

“With that devilish chair? Don’t seem likely. I say he’s hidin’, but he’ll try to make it to Wiley’s when he gets hungry an’ wants a place to sleep.”

“But Sammy’s keeping watch up there.”

“Sammy ain’t got no patience. If that kid ain’t showed up by now, Sammy’s liable to leave. That chair’s got ’im mighty upset.”

The man with the deeper voice cursed. “Sure save us a heap of trouble if that little varmint was to take a fall an’ get his neck broke.”

“I’d rather see the chair broke first. Look at that mark yonder—know what made it?”

“Can’t tell in these wet leaves. Wasn’t no deer.”

Timor chilled. He risked a stealthy glance around his hiding place and made out two figures stooping to examine the ground. They were barely twenty feet away. He drew back quickly as the light swept up the slope toward him.

The man with the light grunted. “Someone’s been through here tonight. Couldn’t be nobody but that boy.”

“Which way’s he headin’?”

“I ain’t one for readin’ trail sign. If Rance Gatlin was here ...”

“Glad he ain’t. Dunno how he feels about all this.”

“He’ll never tell you, but I know.” The light probed upward. “Mighty thick up yonder. Don’t seem reasonable anybody would be goin’ in that direction. Most likely he was comin’ down, aimin’ for the old road here an’ Wiley’s. These marks are recent. Bet that varmint ain’t far ahead of us.”

The light went out. The other man said, “Put it on—we got to catch ’im!”

“No—he may see us comin’. Be too easy for ’im to hide the chair an’ take off. We’d best wait till he gets to Wiley’s an’ settles down.”

They were silent for a while. Then the deeper voice said, “They say the kid didn’t take no light when he left. How can he see in the dark?”

“He’s got the chair, ain’t he? If the devilish thing can talk to ’im, it can do his seein’ for him.”

“You believe that, Fritz?”

“I don’t know what to believe, but that ain’t no ordinary chair, an’ I ain’t takin’ no chances. Didn’t you hear Brad tell about it?”

“Yeah, but Brad, he acts like the little varmint’s just crazy in the head.”

“Brad’s just whistlin’ in the dark. He’d be the first one to bust up that chair if he ever laid hands on it. Mebbe the kid is crazy in the head—but if he is, it’s the same kind o’ craziness old man Gatlin, Rance’s pa, had.”

“I never knowed the old man.”

“Good thing. He had second sight, sort of. You couldn’t hide nothin’ from the old rascal. That’s why Rance an’ his brother Jake left home. Scared blue of their pa—but you’ll never hear ’em admit it. Rance, he’s had schoolin’, but it ain’t changed him inside. He wouldn’t burn sassafras no more’n you would.”

Again they were silent. Then the deeper voice growled, “If that little varmint’s got second sight ...”

“I don’t really think he has. I figger it’s mainly the chair.”

“Better be. If it ever come out about our likker trades ...”

“Won’t, if we get the chair. That kid, he’s got his mind on what happened at

Nat's place."

The other grunted. "That was a queer thing. You an' me know Wiley never took that box 'cause he was in the store making a deal with us when it happened. You reckon it was Rance Gatlin himself took it?"

"Couldn't 'a' been, or Brad would 'a' knowed about it. Can't figger it. All I know is we better find that kid before Nat Battle does. Did you hear Nat arguin' with that Colonel Hamilton?"

"Heard part of it. Thought they was going to have a fight."

"Almost did. Each one seemed to be blamin' the other for the kid runnin' off an' gettin' lost. That Nat, he's as sharp in the woods as Rance Gatlin; he'll track the kid down for sure by mornin' if we don't catch 'im tonight."

"I think we've waited long enough. Let's get on to Wiley's."

The light appeared again and began moving away. Timor waited until he could no longer see it, then crept down to the trail. At the thought of Nathaniel he began hurrying, plunging through the new growth and racing over the open stretches as fast as his small feet would carry him. His uncle's place couldn't be much farther ahead. If he could get there in time to stop Nathaniel ...

Long minutes later he broke through the grove of hemlocks behind the cabin and stood gasping for breath while he studied the yard and the lighted windows.

All the lights in the place were on, though he could see no one moving inside. He darted to the side of the building, stole a cautious look through the kitchen window, and crawled on to the shrubbery at the corner of the front porch. He could hear voices now, and when he raised his head he could see a small group standing by the steps—his uncle in jacket and boots, facing him a sturdy figure in uniform whom he recognized as the local game warden, and a much smaller man in a business suit who wore glasses. Neither Nathaniel nor Odessa was in sight.

Timor glanced despairingly around the yard. The bright lights from the porch shone on Nathaniel's jeep, parked just beyond the game warden's truck and a grey car with a press sticker on the windshield. His uncle's station wagon was gone.

The man with glasses must have just arrived, for Timor heard him ask, "Exactly where are they searching?"

"Nat Battle's gone up by Lost Falls," the warden told him. "That's the general area the boy seems to have disappeared in. Miss Hamilton is patrolling the road in her car, and the Grossers and Al Means are covering the wagon trail—though I think that's all a waste of time. If the boy ever came down on this side of the ridge and struck the trail, he'd know how to get home. Unless, of course, he's hurt. He hasn't got a light."

"Why didn't the others go along with Battle?" the small man asked. "That would have made better sense."

"Nat wanted to work alone," the warden grumbled. "There's nothing the rest of us can do till daylight."

"How long has the boy been gone?"

"Since eleven o'clock this morning," the colonel growled. "I know my daughter's raised a storm over this, but I don't believe Tim's lost. He's been acting like a stubborn fool over that confounded chair ..."

"Colonel Hamilton," the game warden interrupted, "in these mountains we can't take chances when a boy goes off alone and doesn't come back. It's past

midnight now. Your nephew's been gone over thirteen hours. A lot could have happened to him in that time. This is wild country."

The small man said, "I've been hearing a lot about his chair. I understand, Colonel, there's something about it that's convinced both your nephew and Nat Battle—"

"Plague take the chair!" the colonel burst forth angrily. "If you allow any more nonsense to be printed as you did in the Tattler's column, by heaven I'll sue you!"

"Colonel Hamilton," the small man persisted, "your nephew has stirred up something in this county, and it's turning into front page news. It's going to be printed, and it's better to have the facts. When a man like Battle is convinced that a terrible mistake has been made about Wiley Pendergrass—"

"Wiley was a rascal, and that Battle is a fool," the colonel snapped. "Now, if you're through with your questions—"

"I beg your pardon, sir, but if you'll look up Nat Battle's army record, you'll find he's anything but a fool. Furthermore, it might pay us to look twice at this matter. Whether or not there's anything unusual about your nephew's chair, the fact remains that some people *do* have unusual abilities—and your nephew may be such a person."

The colonel made a growling noise deep in his throat, but the newspaperman went on, "Just suppose your nephew actually has knowledge that another person was really guilty of that crime at Battle's. If the boy has mentioned any names, it could be a very dangerous thing to know."

No one spoke for a while. Then the colonel ground out, "You can believe what you wish, but I've heard enough nonsense for one day. If my nephew's lost, I'll move heaven and earth to find him. But I've a feeling he's hiding, and that he'll come dragging home in the morning when he gets hungry enough. If that's the case, he's going to be given something he'll never forget as long as he lives."

10

Manhunt

TIMOR'S TROUBLED CONSCIENCE had been urging him to step forth from his hiding place and attempt to explain what had happened. Surely, he'd thought, if he told everything he had learned, the colonel would be willing to help. But his uncle's last statement was like a door being slammed in his face.

In sudden despair he realized that the only possibility of changing the colonel's mind would be the discovery of the box, and proof of who had taken it. At the moment such a happy circumstance seemed as far away as the moon.

Timor sank down on the ground, his hands clenched tightly. He had never felt so terribly alone. If only Odessa would come, and he could manage to attract her attention ...

He debated slipping over to the road and watching for her, and decided it would be better to remain here. Nathaniel might come back, and he badly needed Nathaniel's advice.

Beyond him he heard the newspaperman say he would return in the morning; presently there was the sound of his car pulling away, followed by footsteps across the porch as the colonel and the warden entered the house.

The night was cold after the rain and Timor was beginning to feel the damp ground through his clothing. The chill had not bothered him while he was moving, but now a spasm of shivering gripped his tired body. He got up, teeth clenched, trying to think of a better spot to wait. Suddenly he remembered there was an opening under the cabin on the opposite side below his room. He crept around to it, unlatched the little door, and squirmed inside between a pile of lumber scraps and bundles of old newspapers.

Even with the door closed it seemed almost colder here than it had outside, but the ground was dry. Timor tried to make himself comfortable by wrapping the too-large jacket about him, but this was not enough for one who had been raised in the tropics. As his misery increased he thought longingly of the blanket he had been forced to leave at Wiley's place. Then he recalled reading that homeless men often wrapped newspapers about them to keep warm in the winter.

He sat up suddenly and turned his light on the bundles of papers beside him. There were enough here to keep a dozen men warm. With shaking hands he tore open the bundles, and as quietly as possible began spreading papers on the ground and over his body. When he was covered with a thick layer of newspapers, he stretched out and drew Wiley's jacket over his ears.

Slowly his shaking stopped. Presently he became comfortably warm. He began to realize that he was becoming entirely too comfortable, for it was all he could do to stay awake and listen for Odessa's return. For a while he managed to fight

off sleep. Finally, when he felt it creeping over him, he tried to sit up, but the effort was beyond him. Weariness from his long hours of exertion pressed upon him like a great weight.

Perhaps, if he slept just a little ...

Vaguely, above the rushing of the creek, Timor became aware of the sound of motors and the murmur of men's voices. He burrowed deeper into his paper bed, trying to shut out the sounds, but the effort was painful. He opened his eyes, wondering why he felt as he did. Memory returned in a rush.

His eyes widened with shock as he realized the night had passed. It was bright daylight beyond his hiding place. Abruptly he sat up, trying to peer through a space between the boards; the effort made him gasp with pain and he sank back into the layers of paper.

He felt all right when he lay still, but the least movement brought a protest from strained muscles that had carried the chair too long over rough country. "*Hari busuk!*" he muttered. "I'm just one big ache."

What was he going to do now?

Once before he had felt like this. It was after his first long tramp with Wiley; he'd never been in mountains like these, and he'd done entirely too much scrambling up and down for one who wasn't used to it. Wiley had said afterward that the best medicine for sore muscles was to get out and start using them again.

He would have to do that, but not immediately. Maybe if he lay still for a while, some of the ache would go away.

What was happening outside? His hiding place was near the rear of the cabin, and trees and shrubbery cut off all view of the yard in front. From the sounds, the yard seemed to be full of cars and people.

But surely, by this time, it would be known that he wasn't really lost! Sammy Grosser knew it. Wouldn't Sammy or his father tell the others that he'd been seen?

No, of course they wouldn't. Those secretive Grossers wouldn't breathe a word until they'd found the chair.

At the thought of the chair, Timor forced himself to sit up. The chair may have been safe for the night, but it wouldn't remain safe during the day with so many people in the woods. He ought to be on his way to it right now, for surely Wiley would have news for him.

Timor crawled to the little door and eased it open. He could see no one within his range of vision. There was shrubbery ahead, and if he stayed within it he could crawl around to the wagon trail without being seen.

Ignoring his protesting muscles, he squirmed out of the opening, thrust the door shut, and crept to the edge of the shrubbery. Painfully he began snaking through clumps of rhododendron and laurel. The trail was still some distance ahead when he found his way blocked by a large truck that had pulled into an opening under the trees.

Timor raised his head worriedly and peered around. On his right he could see the yard for the first time. It was jammed with cars and men moving about. A man in a Forest Service uniform was standing in front of the cabin, giving orders to a large group with packs on their backs. Timor watched a moment, stricken,

then tried to locate Nathaniel's jeep. He could not see it, but in front of the truck he noticed the yellow sports car belonging to Si LeGrande.

Almost in panic he started to crawl away, when he heard voices by the truck. He paused, suddenly sick at heart as it came to him why the truck was here. It was a television truck, and they were getting ready to broadcast.

"Ready?" said a clear voice.

"Take it, Hal."

There was a short pause, and the clear voice began:

"This is Hal Grundy, your on-the-spot newsman reporting to you from the Hamilton summer place on Blue Gap Road, high in the Carolina mountains. These remote highlands are now witnessing one of the strangest manhunts that has ever taken place on our troubled planet. At this moment scores of searchers are combing a great stretch of wilderness for a lost boy with a talking chair, who disappeared from this spot more than twenty-five hours ago. Yes, I said a talking chair, for when young Tim Hamilton left home and entered the forest, he took with him his most cherished possession, a mysterious ladderback chair made of sassafras, which is widely rumored to have the power of speech. Men have been looking for Tim Hamilton since early last evening; they've searched all night and all morning, but so far they have found not a trace of either Tim or his chair.

"Few people have actually seen Tim Hamilton's chair, but everyone knows about it. It is a thing they discuss only in whispers. To help you understand how it has affected this area, I will turn the microphone over to Si LeGrande, well-known authority on mountain lore and legend, who will tell you more about Tim and give you some of the background ..."

Timor was too stunned to hear any more. The enormity of what he had brought about was almost past belief. Television—scores of men searching—Nathaniel out all night—more men leaving now—the yard full of curious people and reporters.... He could almost see his uncle raging. Never, as long as he lived, would the colonel forgive him for what was going on.

Somehow he managed to creep away from the truck and gain the edge of the wagon trail. He got to his feet and plunged onward a little blindly, his mind in a whirl, his aches momentarily forgotten. He felt curiously weak, and gradually it came to him that he was not only thirsty but very hungry. He had eaten little at breakfast yesterday, and only a small can of peas last night. This was another day—Wiley's last day to help—and already it was half over. How could he have slept so long?

Occasional small springs seeped from the slope on his left and trickled down to the creek. He paused by one and drank deeply. It made him feel a trifle better, though now he was more aware of his pains and hunger. There was food at Wiley's place, if he could manage to enter it unseen. But the chair was more important. He must go to it first and talk to Wiley.

He went on warily, keeping watch behind as well as in front. During the next half hour he saw no one. Apparently the searchers had decided that he could not be on this side of the ridge, and were spreading through the wilder country beyond. Only the Grossers and the man named Al Means knew better.

Thinking of the Grossers, Timor grew more cautious as he drew near Wiley's place. He circled behind it, studying every bush and tree for a hidden watcher. Reassured at last, he went on past the barn and approached the spring.

There was no sign that anyone had been here since his visit last night. Creeping to the edge of the rhododendron thicket, he whispered hopefully, "Mr. Pendergrass?"

There was no answer, and he called again.

Why wasn't Wiley waiting for him? Surely, by this time ...

In sudden worry he looked into the thicket, trying to see the chair. He must have hidden it better than he'd realized. It *had* to be here somewhere.

But it wasn't! The sassafras chair was gone.

Frantically, Timor plunged through the thicket and into other thickets nearby. There was no sign of the chair, not even a broken fragment. Whoever had taken it had not destroyed it here.

He sank down at last on the mossy ground. A dry sob broke from him. Suddenly, everything had come to an end.

What could he possibly do without the chair?

Who could have taken it? Not Sammy, for Sammy would have destroyed it on the spot. So would Fritz Grosser and the other man. Remembering Sammy's fear of it, it seemed strange that anyone who wanted to get rid of it would actually carry it away.

Gnawing hunger finally drove him to his feet and on to the cabin.

He approached the cabin from the rear, forgetting that he had barred the back door until his hand touched the latch. But the door swung open to his touch.

He entered slowly, suddenly watchful again. The cabin had been restored to order since his bout with Sammy, for every piece of the broken hickory chair had been picked up and stacked neatly in the wood box. Even the blanket he had dropped had been folded carefully and replaced on the bed. It was hard to imagine Sammy or his father doing this.

Timor hurried to the back shelf and started to select a can. Instantly he noticed something he did not remember seeing before. One of the cans had a piece of white paper folded about it, covering the label. On it was scrawled the word *Wetan*.

He stared at it curiously, then comprehension came. *Wetan* had the same meaning as *timor*, the Malay word for east. The paper about the can must be a note addressed to him—only the writer of it had cleverly used the synonym instead of his real name. If other eyes saw it the word would be meaningless, for anyone glancing at the shelf would suppose that old Wiley himself had put it there, to label some concoction of his own.

All this flashed through Timor's mind in an instant, and he knew that the writer of the note had placed it in the one spot where he would be bound to find it—in the middle of the shelf where food was kept.

Only Nathaniel would have come here and thought of this way of communicating.

Eagerly he snatched down the can and started to unwrap the paper. Then, without quite realizing why he did so, he quickly rewrapped the paper about the can and thrust it into his jacket pocket. The invisible string was tugging at him again, urging him across the room to the front door. He hesitated, looking about him and listening. His ears could detect nothing unusual or suspicious.

Then his eyes, roving about the dim room, fastened upon something small and white on the hearth.

It was a match with a chewed end.

The sight of it brought a small sharp icicle of fright stabbing through him. He gained the front door, jerked it open, and ran. As he sped away he was almost certain he heard a small sound in the room behind him, as if the rear door were being opened. But he did not take time to look back.

11

Pursuit

TIMOR dodged through the trees along the creek, heading upstream. When he paused briefly to glance behind him, the cabin was no longer in sight, nor could he see anyone coming. But the invisible string still tugged at him. Without quite thinking what he was doing, he turned left at the tiny branching stream he had followed so long yesterday, ran a few yards to leave footprints by the edge, then stepped into the water and waded carefully back to the creek.

It was a trick Wiley had told him about one day when they were discussing trails and trail signs, though he did not consciously remember it now until he had waded up the creek to the huge yellow rock that marked his favorite fishing spot.

Timor crept through the shallows to the back of the rock, and climbed up and crouched behind the ancient chestnut log that had fallen across the top. From this vantage point he could easily make out anyone approaching without being seen. The can made a comforting bulge in his jacket pocket. Perhaps he could open it later with his knife ...

With a watchful eye on the trail, he fumbled in his pocket and unrolled the note.

The note read: *Saya pegang krosi. Tunggu buat saya sebarang jembatan. Saya kembali lekas. Saya mengerti semua jadi sini. Ati ati orang sama korek api. N.*

Nathaniel's Malay wasn't perfect but, freely interpreted, his meaning was clear: *I have taken the chair. Wait for me across the bridge. I will return quickly. I understand all that happened here. Beware of the man with the match. Nathaniel.*

Timor's spirits momentarily leaped with the first line and dropped with the last. But his already high opinion of Nathaniel went up several more notches. He had no doubt that Nathaniel, on going back to Wiley's place, had correctly read the signs he found there. As for the chair ... He breathed a prayer of thanks. If Nathaniel hadn't located it first, another skilled trail follower might have had his hands on it by this time.

Where was Nathaniel now? He must have carried the chair away in the jeep, probably to the shop. The note couldn't have been written long ago, for if Nathaniel had returned and not found his passenger waiting, he would have gone on to the cabin to see if the note had been taken.

For an instant Timor wondered if it had been Nathaniel he had run away from. Then reason told him it wasn't. Nathaniel would have called out to him.

Timor thrust the note back into his pocket and peered cautiously over the top of the log. He could see no one, nor could he make out even a suspicious shadow or a movement in the brush to indicate anyone was near. But someone *was* near. Of that he was sure. His skin prickled at the back of his neck, and he could feel a

coldness that ran all the way down his spine.

He swallowed, and cautiously began lowering himself from the rock. Somehow he must manage to cross the creek unseen, and slip back through the brush on the other side and wait for Nathaniel.

The creek was not as high as it had been last night, though it still came rushing down with a swiftness that could easily send him tumbling if he missed his footing. He studied it for a few seconds, then waded up to a shallow area and began picking his way between the rocks to the other bank.

The icy water tugged at him and threatened to throw him as it swept up past his knees. He slipped on the last step and would have gone down but for an overhanging alder bush; he clutched it frantically, and drew himself to safety.

Thick alder scrub bordered this side of the creek, offering perfect protection as he crept down toward the bridge. Wiley had never bothered to enlarge the bridge so he could bring his truck over, but had always parked in an open spot between the creek and the road. As Timor neared the opening he watched hopefully for Nathaniel's jeep. The parking spot was empty.

While he waited on the edge of a thicket, he pulled off his sneakers and socks, squeezed the water out, and drew them back on. He was lacing his sneakers when he heard a car coming down the steep incline from the road. It must be Nathaniel returning.

But it wasn't. Timor had just time to flatten under the shrubs before a blue car swung into the parking place and stopped. With bitter disappointment he watched the driver get out and move slowly and watchfully down the path leading to the bridge. The man was a stranger, but there was an odd flatness to his face that made Timor think of Deputy Gatlin. Could this be Rance Gatlin's brother Jake?

The man paused near the bridge, took something from his pocket, and held it to his mouth. Timor had never seen anyone use a turkey call before, but now he recognized the sound when it came. The man was signaling.

What was keeping Nathaniel? From here it was five miles to the Forks; surely it wouldn't take more than a half hour to drive there, hide the chair in the shop, and come back.

Timor glanced worriedly in the direction of the bridge. He could not see it from where he lay, but he could make out the stranger's head and shoulders near a tree, and he glimpsed another man approaching through the shrubbery. The newcomer's face was hidden, but in his mind he could see the match thrust between the thin lips, and almost feel the impact of the pale eyes in the flat expressionless face.

The two men stood together only a moment, then quietly separated, one vanishing upstream into the alders, the other fading into the growth below the parking area.

Timor felt like a small mouse in a trap. He realized his trick of wading hadn't worked. *They knew he was on this side of the creek.* If he remained where he was, it would be only a matter of minutes before they found him.

Trembling, he tried to slide backward, deeper into the shadow of the protective shrubbery that arched over his head. The too-large jacket was an encumbrance. Weighed down by the can in one pocket and the flashlight in the other, it caught on the twigs around him and refused to budge without causing a

disturbance. He tried to slide out of it, but froze as he saw movement a few yards away.

The movement stopped, and through the screen of leaves he made out the shape of a man crouching, watching the alder tangle stretching upstream. The man was gripping something in his right hand. Was it a short piece of iron pipe?

It was.

Timor chilled. Even without the weapon, the stealth and the deadly intentness of the watching man were enough to tell him of his danger. These two hunting him were not like the Grossers.

The Grossers had wanted only to destroy the chair, but the Gatlins seemed determined to destroy the chair's owner.

Why? Was it because they thought he knew who had taken the box? Rance Gatlin had taken it—there was no doubt of that now. But would they want to kill him merely because he knew? That wasn't enough. Was it something about the box? That had to be it. The box—the *peti blik*, as he always thought of it—was lost. The Gatlins hadn't bothered to look for it. Were they afraid the chair's owner might find it?

The afternoon had turned warm, but Timor did not notice it. The can of food in his pocket was forgotten with his hunger and his aches. He fought rising panic and clung to the ground, knowing his only chance was to play rabbit and remain absolutely motionless.

The seconds dragged. Why didn't Nathaniel come?

From somewhere upstream, faintly, he heard the sudden *tauk, tauk, tauk* of the turkey call. Was the fox announcing that the rabbit's trail had been located? The crouching man rose, took a long, slow look about him, and began moving soundlessly into the brush.

With his heart pounding, Timor crawled from his shelter, sped on tiptoe around the back of the blue car, and raced up the path to the road. At this moment he would have welcomed the sight of anyone on the road, even his uncle or the Grossers. The mountains were filled with men hunting him—but the road here was empty.

He looked quickly backward and found that the blue car was now hidden by the trees. That meant no one could see him, though the fact gave him no comfort. If the fox with the match had so easily discovered that the rabbit had crossed the creek, it wouldn't be long before it was known that the fleeing rabbit had taken to the road.

Timor raced down the rutted gravel, praying that someone, anyone, would come driving by and give him a ride. If he could stay on the road long enough he would surely meet Nathaniel. But how long dare he stay? Despairingly he realized that every passing second added to his danger. He should be seeking cover now.

Suddenly he heard a car approaching ahead. It must be Nathaniel.

He went stumbling on to meet it, gasping for breath.

It was not a jeep that swung around the bend, but a battered vehicle he had never seen before. Timor waved both hands at it and the car braked to a stop beside him. Joey Jackson was driving.

Joey gawked at him as he scrambled into the back and crouched down behind the driver's seat. "Turn around!" he urged Joey. "Hurry—they'll be coming after

me in a minute!”

“Can’t turn here,” Joey said uncertainly. “Road’s too narrow. I gotta keep goin’. W—who’s after you?”

“Some men in a blue car—they’re at Wiley’s place. They—they’re trying to kill me, Joey. Maybe we can get past before they come out, but you’ve got to hurry!”

“I’ll try!” Joey sent the old machine forward with a grinding of gears.

Timor remained hidden until they were well past the danger area, then asked, “Did you notice anyone when we went by?”

“Yeah. That Gatlin feller. He was standin’ by the road—seemed like he was lookin’ for your footprints. He must figger you know all about him if he aims to kill you.”

Timor swallowed. “Yes. Joey, where are you going now?”

“Back over the Gap. I come down to learn if you’d been found—stopped at Wiley’s place first, but didn’t see nobody so I went on to your uncle’s. Tim, you’re plum’ crazy to be hidin’ like this when everybody in the world ...”

“I—I *had* to hide—and I’ve got to stay hidden until I’ve found Mr. Battle. He was supposed to meet me, but I’m afraid something’s happened. Was he at my uncle’s place?”

“Didn’t notice ’im there.”

“Then he must be at his shop. Joey, I’ve got to go there. Can you turn around somewhere and take me to the Forks?”

Joey’s face tightened. “I—I don’t think we’d better. Not just yet. That Gatlin feller, he seen me go by. He might get ideas if I was to come back too soon. An’ that ain’t all.” Joey’s hands clenched the wheel so hard his knuckles whitened.

“What’s the matter?”

“Your tracks. If I’d picked you up down by your uncle’s bridge where the new gravel starts, your tracks wouldn’t show. But up here the clay’s come through with the rain. Look at your shoes an’ see if they ain’t got clay on ’em.”

Timor peered at his sneakers. “You’re right.”

Joey sent the old car forward as fast as it would go. “He was lookin’ for your tracks, an’ he’ll foller ’em sure an’ see where you got in the car. Anybody could figger that out.”

Timor felt numb. “Joey, stop and let me go. If he finds me with you, he’ll ...”

“Nothin’ doin’! I ain’t desertin’ you now. If I can get us over the Gap, there’ll be folks around an’ he won’t bother us. Pull up that rear seat an’ crawl back in the trunk. Heap of stuff in there, but anybody small as you oughta be able to squeeze in.”

The lining behind the seat, Timor soon discovered, had long ago vanished and he had little trouble crawling through after he had pulled off his jacket and thrust it in ahead of him. He tugged the seat back in place and managed to wedge himself between it and a musty roll of canvas that seemed to be a tent.

The car was climbing now, for the motor was laboring. Presently he heard Joey shift gears and he could feel the car lurching as it swung about the hairpin turns near the Gap. Timor tried not to think of the way the mountain fell sharply away at the road’s edge, with a drop of hundreds of feet to the valley below.

Suddenly there was the sound of another car behind them, then a shout, an abrupt jolt, and the rasp of tires fighting loose gravel. The wild motion stopped and he heard Joey cry out in fright, “What are you tryin’ to do—run me off the

road?”

A car door slammed, footsteps crunched beside them, and the rear door of Joey's car was jerked open. Timor held his breath, trembling. He could feel the pale unseen eyes of the fox probing about, searching for a sign of the rabbit, wondering ...

The fox's curiously soft voice demanded, “Just where do you think you're going?”

“C-casey's Cabins,” Joey stammered. “I—I work there.”

“What's your name?”

“J-joeey Jackson.”

“So. You're the one who was hauling gravel with Shorty last month.”

“Yessir.”

“Did you stop down the road a while ago?”

“Sure, I stopped. W-what's this all about?”

“Why did you stop?”

“I—I thought I seen somethin' jump into the bushes.”

“Something—or somebody?”

“I—I dunno. I'd just been to the Hamilton place to see if they'd found that lost boy everybody's talkin' about. Reckon I had him on my mind.”

“Let's have the keys to your trunk.”

“L-look, mister,” Joey protested. “I ain't broke no law or nothin'. How come—”

There was the sound of another motor in the rear, and a squeal of brakes. A high-pitched woman's voice called out, “What's going on here, Joey?”

“I—I dunno, Mrs. Casey. Ask these fellers what they want. They won't tell me.”

The soft voice purred, “Thought he might have liquor in the car, Mrs. Casey. Someone's been—”

“Liquor!” the woman shrilled. “And you're picking on Joey? For Pete's sake, Rance Gatlin, what's got into you? I thought you were supposed to be out hunting that lost Hamilton boy! Stop holding up traffic and let Joey and me go home. I've got nine guests coming for dinner tonight and there's no end of work to do. Get going, Joey!”

Timor went limp. Then, as the old car moved on over the Gap, his fear returned. The fox hadn't seen the inside of the trunk, but he must have guessed the rabbit was hidden in it ...

The car stopped presently, and he heard Joey get out. The other car stopped close by, and now Mrs. Casey's voice snapped, “Joey Jackson Pendergrass, I don't know what was going on back there, but you'll keep no secrets from me. When I gave you a job, you promised on your honor you'd never fool around with liquor again. Have you broken your word?”

“N-no, ma'am! Honest, I ...”

“Joey, I'd trust you a mile farther than I would that pussy-footing Gatlin, but you're up to something. What is it?”

“Mrs. Casey, honest ...”

“Don't lie to me. Your cousin Wiley couldn't do it. He was more saint than rascal, if people only knew it—but I'm not so sure of you. You're up to something, Joey, and you're scared. Why?”

“Mrs. Casey, I got a right to be scared. Them fellers, they tried to run me off the road. They're out to kill us. They ...”

"Us?" Mrs. Casey repeated sharply.

Timor had heard enough. He thrust the seat out of the way and crawled from his cramped hiding place, then stood clutching his jacket, blinking with some astonishment at the woman in blue jeans standing in front of a new truck beside Joey. From her voice, which triumphed over all opposing sound, he had expected to see a huge woman; but Mrs. Casey was small, thin and red-headed, with a no-nonsense face that was completely covered with freckles.

"Mrs. Casey," Timor began, with an uneasy glance around at the encircling evergreens, the row of cabins, and the large building beside them, "Joey's telling the truth. I—I'd probably be dead now if he hadn't helped. But I don't think I'd better stand here—if Mr. Gatlin comes ... and he will—he must have guessed by now where I was."

"Who are you?"

"Tim Hamilton."

Mrs. Casey blinked. "Great skies above," she whispered. Suddenly she tugged at his arm. "Quick, into the office here."

She threw open the side door of the building next to them, and thrust him in ahead of her. She kicked the door closed and darted behind the counter that cut the small room in half, reached under it, and thumped something on the blotter in front of her. It was a pistol.

"Let him come," she snapped. "He'll find out who can shoot straight. I always told Maggie McBane that Rance was a weasel, but she wouldn't believe me."

She stared hard at him, frowning. "Son, you look beat. Have you eaten today?"

He shook his head. "There isn't time to eat," he told her urgently. "I—I've got to find out what happened to Mr. Battle. It—it's terribly important. Have you a telephone?"

"I have, but I'll do the calling while you eat. Joey, bring those sandwiches from the ice box and put coffee on. Now, before I call Nathaniel, let's have the truth about your talking chair." She paused, and added quietly, "Is—is Wiley really helping you to find out what happened at the Forks?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She closed her eyes a moment. "Bless the old rascal!" she said fervently. "I was telling May Connor this morning he'd give up his glory crown to come back and help his friends."

With a watchful glance out of the window, she picked up the telephone behind her, searched for a number on a card pinned to the wall, and began dialing.

12

Dowser

JOEY brought in a platter of sandwiches and went back to tend the coffee. Mrs. Casey, with one eye ever on the window, fretted with the telephone; finally she slammed down the receiver. "Always the busy signal," she bit out. "That's the trouble with party lines. Nathaniel's on one, I'm on another. We'll just have to wait. I'll keep trying, Tim, but you sit down and eat and tell me what happened."

Between bites of thick beef sandwiches he told it briefly from the beginning. She interrupted him with hurried questions until she had the story straight. Her eyes were blazing when he finished. She started to say something, then her face suddenly hardened as her glance went again to the office window.

"Here he comes!" she whispered. "Sneaking up from the road to look at Joey's car. Keep out of sight, Tim. I'll handle the weasel."

She slipped the pistol into her pocket and stepped boldly outside. "If you're still trying to pick on Joey," she shrilled, "I'll have your scalp and your hide to go with it! He told me how you tried to run him off the mountain a while ago. Have you completely lost your mind?"

Timor could not hear the reply, but presently Mrs. Casey returned. "I think I have them buffaloeed for the moment," she said grimly. "The way I see it, they're not sure now whether Joey brought you here or let you out somewhere on the road before he was stopped. Anyway, they've gone back down the valley. Whatever we do, we'll have to work fast."

She snatched up the telephone and dialed again. At last she put it down slowly and ran her hand through her mass of red hair. Suddenly she called, "Joey, come here."

Joey came running. "Forget the coffee," she told him. "I'm taking Tim down to the Forks to find Nathaniel. If that devil comes back, tell him if he hasn't a search warrant he can get out—but keep the shotgun handy."

"M-mrs. Casey," Joey stammered, "hadn't you better stay here with Tim an' let me hunt Mr. Battle?"

"No, you've done your turn. Anyhow, it would take too long, and they may catch you and get rough. I may be a widow, but they won't meddle with me. I've a brother who's a lawyer and another who's a judge."

"What about them folks you got comin' for supper?"

"You and the cook will just have to handle them. Let's go, Tim."

They ran out to her truck. Inside, she placed the pistol on the seat between them and said, "Watch the road both ways, and duck down on the floor if you see anyone."

She sent the new truck roaring out of the driveway into the road. In a few

minutes they had climbed to the Gap and were twisting down into the long blue valley on the other side. Timor rolled up the sleeves of Wiley's too-long shirt and sat clutching the jacket, thinking of something Joey had told him. The gravel was the answer. The new gravel. Why hadn't he realized it earlier?

"I think I see them," Mrs. Casey said abruptly. "There's a car waiting at the edge of the road way down by the next turn. Better duck."

He slid to the floor and pulled the jacket over his head. Mrs. Casey sped down the long grade, leaned on the horn, and braked only slightly as they made the turn.

"Those were our boys," she muttered. "They started to block the road, but I wasn't giving an inch. Now the question is whether they'll go back to worry Joey, or follow us."

Presently she said, "They've decided to follow. They're only guessing, of course. They're too smart to try anything; they'll just tag along and keep us in sight." She gave a harsh little laugh. "This is as bad as an old-time movie, but the awful part of it is that we can't prove anything against them. Not one single thing! If I told Maggie McBane they tried to kill you and run Joey off the road, she'd get on her high horse and say I was imagining it. She's as hardheaded as that uncle of yours. Oh, I'd like to give him a piece of my mind!"

Timor thrust the jacket aside, but remained on the floor. "If I could find that lost box, it would be proof enough, wouldn't it?"

"It certainly ought to—if it had fingerprints on it."

"Would being buried in the ground ruin the prints?"

"Not too much, I understand. All they need is one little print. Have you any idea at all where the box is?"

"Yes, but I'll have to talk it over with Nathaniel."

"Well, we're almost at Wiley's road. Nathaniel may be there waiting."

She slowed almost to a stop, and leaned over Timor for a quick look down at Wiley's parking space. Then her foot stabbed the gas pedal. "His jeep's not there. Better cover up again—we'll be passing your uncle's place in a minute. It's swarming."

The truck rushed on. "If only Nathaniel had thought to bring the chair to me!" she wailed. "Tim, if he wrote that message to you at noon, it was hours ago. I can't help feeling ..."

She slowed once more as they neared his uncle's road, creeping along until she had studied the cars parked along the road's shoulder and beyond the bridge. "No sign of him," she announced. "Pray he's at the shop."

The truck raced ahead, its tires making a different sound as it reached the newly graveled area that stretched downstream. Timor listened to the sound, wondering if Nathaniel had guessed.

"Are the Gatlins still behind us?" he asked.

"I don't see them. Either they're up to something, or they were stopped by the highway patrol. There's a confab going on by your bridge—if Rance is supposed to be out searching, they'd want to talk to him ..."

Minutes later she turned in at the Forks. Timor sat up. Nathaniel's jeep was at the back of the shop. Mrs. Casey braked beside it, leaped out, and ran to the door.

The door was locked. She pounded upon it, then raced around to the front. She

reappeared in seconds, her freckled face tight with worry.

"I knew something was wrong! Oh, what could have happened? Maybe somebody at the diner can tell me ..."

She started away, then stopped as a taxi came speeding across the highway bridge from town. It turned towards the shop and braked near the front. A very grim Nathaniel sprang out, thrust money at the driver, and hastened to the truck. His eyes widened, but he said nothing until the taxi was gone and he had let them into the shop and locked the door.

"Praise be!" he burst forth. "How in the world did you two get together?"

Mrs. Casey told him. "But for heaven's sake, what's happened to you?"

The hawk face was unshaven and bruised. The khaki shirt and trousers on the sinewy frame were dirty and torn. The knuckles of the lean brown hands were bandaged. At her question, the black eyes flashed.

"I've been in jail, Lou. Your brother got me out."

"Jail!" she shrilled. "What ever for!"

"Assault and battery. I'm sure Tim told you about running into Sammy last night. Well, the signs were clear. This morning I caught Sammy watching near Wiley's place and went to work on him."

Lou Casey grinned. "You beat up that big lunk? Where is he now?"

"In bed," Nathaniel growled. "But he babbled before I put him there. I learned some things. Trouble was, he's Brad James' kin—and Brad came after me with a warrant just as I got here with the chair—"

Timor gasped. "The chair—is it safe?"

"I hid it in time. No one knows it's here. Before I get it out, let's check and see where we stand. But I've got to have coffee. Guess we all need it. Tim, while I'm making it, let's hear about you."

The coffee was ready when Timor finished. He sipped from his steaming cup, and asked, "Did Sammy see Mr. Gatlin hide the box in one of the gravel trucks?"

Nathaniel shook his head. "No, but he saw enough to figure it out. He made the same mistake we did at first. He thought Rance had tossed it in front in one of the cabs. When he sneaked back that night to get it, it wasn't there. It wasn't till later that he realized the box had been hidden in the gravel—shoved out of sight—and that Rance hadn't had time to come back and get it before it was dumped on the road."

Mrs. Casey nearly dropped her cup. "You mean to say your box has been up there in the road all this time?"

"Yes. That's why Sammy was out searching every night."

"But why wasn't Rance looking—" Then Mrs. Casey gasped. "Oh, the Connors! Their land was the important thing."

Nathaniel nodded. "Sure, the box could wait. The Gatlins thought they'd skinned the Connors on that land deal—until that bronze sapphire was found. No one ever dreamed ..."

"Poor May Connor told me this morning they're mortgaged to the ears and can't borrow another dime—and that the Gatlins will probably get the land back."

"Exactly," said Nathaniel. "Unless they finish paying. So now the Gatlins are worried. They're afraid Tim can find the box. That one sapphire is worth enough ..."

Lou Casey set her coffee cup down. "How can anybody find that box under a mile of gravel?"

"Let's ask Wiley," Nathaniel said quietly.

He drew the curtains and began shifting boxes. Presently he brought forth the hidden chair. The polished sassafras was glowing. Lou Casey stared at it in awe. Nathaniel blinked.

But Timor suddenly cried out happily, "Mr. Pendergrass!" For to him old Wiley had appeared almost instantly, his sharp eyes glittering with excitement.

"About time!" Wiley cackled. "About time! Ding blatt it, I thought you was never—Mis' Lou, Nathaniel, can you all see me?"

Mrs. Casey said nothing, but Nathaniel whispered, "Wiley, is that you talking? I can't see you, but ..."

"Naw, 'course you can't—only Timmy here has what it takes." Wiley pounded the chair arm impatiently. "You've got it all figgered out, so get goin'! You want that box, don't you?"

"B-but how can we find it?" Timor asked.

"I'll show you! Take the chair along, an' have Nathaniel cut you a witch hazel fork. You know how to dowse for gems. Nathaniel, Timmy's the best dowser I ever seen. But hurry before that meddlin' mule that put you in jail—"

Wiley groaned as footsteps crunched in the gravel outside. There came an abrupt pounding on the door.

"Open up!" demanded the voice of Brad James.

Nathaniel stood frozen a moment. His eyes narrowed in quick decision; he let the deputy in.

Brad James stared at Timor. Then he glared accusingly at Nathaniel. "So Sammy was right—you been hidin' the kid while the whole world's out huntin' 'im! What's the big idea?"

Nathaniel snapped, "I tried to tell you earlier he was in danger, and you wouldn't believe me. Rance and his brother tried twice to murder him today. They're somewhere up the valley now. Brad, you're going with us and arrest them."

Brad snorted derisively. "Are you plum' crazy?"

"You blind idiot," said Nathaniel, "you let that devil rob me practically under your nose that night! The proof's up the valley. Now let's get up there!"

"You've got rocks in the head. I'm takin' the kid home an' callin' off the hunt, but you—"

Nathaniel grabbed him by the shirt front. "You'll come with us and do your duty, or I'll tear off that badge and give you what I gave Sammy!"

"You tryin' to threaten an officer?" Brad said hoarsely. "I'll slap you back in jail so fast—"

"Stop it!" Lou Casey cried. "Brad, we know what we're talking about. *Look—look at the chair!*"

Brad James became aware of the chair for the first time. He stiffened, staring. The sassafras chair was glowing brighter and brighter. The glow became more brilliant than Timor had ever seen it, as if somehow old Wiley had managed to transfer all his own energy into the golden wood. Timor couldn't see Wiley now, but he could hear him chuckle faintly. "Takes a heap o' juice an' cackle, but this oughta fix 'im!"

Brad swallowed. He backed away and managed to say feebly, "Let's—let's get movin'."

On the way up the valley they stopped once while Nathaniel cut a slender forked switch from a shrub. They passed the Gatlins' blue car, parked near the entrance to the Hamilton road. It was empty. Beyond it a highway patrol officer momentarily barred the way, then waved them on with a shout that was taken up by others as they crossed the bridge. With the cry that the boy had been found, a forest ranger fired his pistol three times into the air, and another began speaking rapidly into a walkie-talkie. There was sudden excitement at the television truck, and newsmen came running.

Timor shrank. Then he saw his uncle, stony-faced, hurrying down the cabin steps with Deputy Gatlin at his elbow. Timor clutched Mrs. Casey's arm. What was the fox up to now? Where was his brother?

Odessa raced past her father and darted through the crowd. "Timmy! Timmy—are you all right?"

"He's all right," Mrs. Casey said grimly. "But no thanks to those Gatlins. Brad," she cried, "get Rance before he—"

Odessa whispered quickly, "He's telling Daddy that Timmy's sick, and we mustn't listen to any wild story—" She stopped as the colonel strode up, thrusting a man with a microphone out of the way.

"I'll take over," the colonel said firmly. "This boy needs medical attention."

"Just a minute," Brad James began, and suddenly faltered as he faced the colonel and the soft speaking man beside him.

"Arrest him!" Lou Casey shrilled. "He and Jake tried to kill Tim! Where's Jake gone?"

"This is ridiculous," said the colonel. "Mr. Gatlin has told me how Tim's been acting. I'm sorry you people have been taken in by his tales. The boy isn't responsible. Come, Tim, into the house with you."

"No!" said Timor. "He's lying and we can prove it." He jumped from Mrs. Casey's truck, squirmed away from his uncle's grasp, and ran to Nathaniel's jeep. He had dreaded this return, and now he was badly shaken to find it so much worse than he had ever expected. What if he couldn't find the box after all?

Men crowded about them, and one cried, "Where's that talking chair?"

"Right here," said Nathaniel. He jerked a canvas cover from the back of the jeep, lifted out the chair, and set it carefully on the ground. There was sudden silence as everyone stared at it.

For a moment it seemed to be only another ladder-back chair of rather unusual color. Then the sun, dipping behind the western ridge, cast a final ray upon it. The chair began to glow with an increasing brightness.

With awed murmurs, the crowd fell back. Timor did not notice his uncle; his attention was on the man beside him, who was chewing a match. As the man's pale eyes widened upon the chair, his mouth fell open and the match dropped. All at once he whirled as if to run. Brad James caught him and disarmed him; there was a tussle, then a click of handcuffs.

But the prisoner was by no means subdued. His soft voice was suddenly dangerous. "You've made a big mistake. This crazy boy has made fools of all of you! What are you charging me with? Where's your proof?"

"The proof's in the road!" Lou Casey's shrill tones drowned all other sound. "You people have been wrong about Wiley Pendergrass—this is the man who robbed Nathaniel. He hid the box in a gravel truck, and it was dumped on the road."

There were exclamations. Men asked, "How are you going to find it?"

"Tim can find it," said Nathaniel, as he rapidly trimmed the forked switch he had cut earlier. "He's a born dowser. He can find gems as well as water. Let's go over on the road."

Timor took the witch hazel switch and followed Nathaniel, who carried the chair. Lou Casey and the silent colonel came behind, with the excited crowd at their heels.

"Tim," the colonel suddenly murmured, "Tim, it's hard for me to believe in all this. Is—is it true about the box—is it really in the road somewhere?"

"Yes, sir. We know it's there."

"And you actually think you can find it—by dowsing?"

"I—I haven't had much experience, Uncle Ira, but I'll do my best. Wiley taught me how."

On the road where the new gravel began, Nathaniel set the chair down. Suddenly he shouted, and began to run. Timor almost dropped the forked switch. Farther down near the blue car a man was digging desperately in the loose gravel by the road's edge. It was Jake Gatlin. At the sight of the crowd he dropped his shovel and raced to his car. Before Nathaniel could reach him he was roaring away towards the Forks.

Nathaniel hurried back. "Forget him," he said. "He'll be caught. Was he digging in the right place, Tim?"

Timor looked at the chair, and shook his head. The chair was glowing reassuringly, and faintly from it old Wiley's voice was ordering, "Further down, Timmy—then get that switch to workin'! Them Gatlins was only guessin' ..."

Beyond the spot where Jake had been digging, Timor paused. He closed his eyes in a fervent prayer, and held the forked switch upright in the way old Wiley had taught him. Slowly he paced forward. Nathaniel came close behind him with the chair. The silent crowd followed.

The chair's glow was dimming, and Wiley's voice was becoming fainter. Once Timor stopped, uncertain, and old Wiley said urgently, "Keep goin', Timmy! I'm near out o' cackle, but we're almost there ... to the left ... filled a deep washout ..."

Wiley's voice faded, but Timor hardly needed it now. The invisible string was suddenly tugging at him, and the witch hazel fork was slowly twisting in his hands, pointing at a downward angle. Timor drew a long breath finally, and closed his eyes. He felt ready to drop.

Colonel Hamilton hurried up to him. "Don't give up, son. I—I'm a little late, but I'm betting on you."

"It's all right, Uncle Ira," he said weakly. "I think you're standing right on it."

Shovels were brought. Eager hands dug. Ten inches down, a slightly battered but still-intact enameled tin box was unearthed and carefully removed to preserve its telltale fingerprints.

Late that night, when the valley had gone to rest after the excitement of the

day, Timor awoke to the sound of his name. He sat up, and instantly forgot his weariness. Over in its corner the sassafras chair was glowing brightly, and old Wiley, eyes happy and intent upon him, sat waiting expectantly.

"Hated to wake you, Timmy, but, well, I—"

Timor swallowed. "Don't tell me your time's up already!"

"Yep. A couple more minutes, an' I gotta be goin'."

"D-do you *have* to go?"

"By Dooley, Timmy, a bargain's a bargain. But pshaw, don't worry about my glory crown." Wiley grinned. "A feller with my reputation, why, I never had one comin' in the first place."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that. Your reputation has certainly changed lately. Couldn't you manage to—to come back once in a while?"

"That ain't for me to say. The thing is, Timmy, d'you reckon you can get along a mite better from now on? I mean, I know how it's been with you, comin' to a strange place like America an' all, an' havin' to live with your uncle ..."

"Oh, I don't think Uncle Ira and I will ever have any more trouble. We—we've sort of got to know each other. And now that I have friends like Nathaniel and Mrs. Casey ..."

"That's good. Never judge the woods by the weasels in it. Well, Timmy, I gotta skedaddle. I won't say good-by. Just keep your fingers crossed, 'cause you never can tell ..."

The chair lost its brightness as Wiley vanished, but its soft glow remained. Timor looked at it a long time before he went back to sleep, finding its glow vastly comforting.

The sassafras chair still glows—though maybe this is only because of the golden wood, so carefully polished by an understanding hand. And maybe all that happened could have happened without the chair, as certain people insist upon saying. Maybe. But those in the high mountains know better. And so does Timor. There is a magic in certain woods, and a very special kind of magic in sassafras.

About the Author

Alexander Key (1904–1979) started out as an illustrator before he began writing science fiction novels for young readers. He has published many titles, including *Sprockets: A Little Robot*, *Mystery of the Sassafras Chair*, and *The Forgotten Door*, winner of the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award. Key's novel *Escape to Witch Mountain* was adapted for film in 1975, 1995, and 2009.

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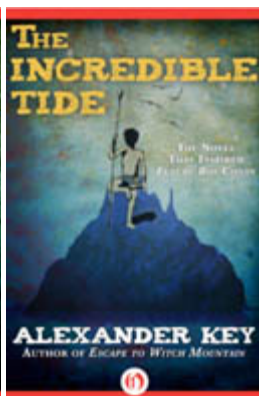
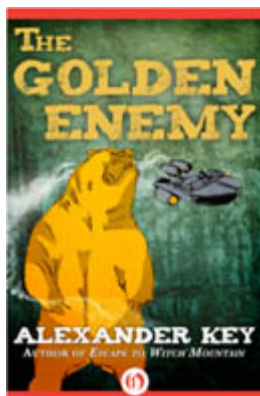
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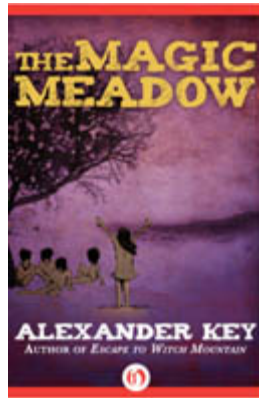
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